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**Girls' Perceptions of their Primary Education  
and the Possible Role their Mothers Have Had  
in Helping to Construct these Perceptions.**

**by**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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## **Declaration.**

I declare that this thesis is the work of myself, Janet Anne Roberts, and it has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

## **Abstract.**

This research is concerned with looking at how girls experience their primary education. The aim is to try and discover how the girls perceive themselves as primary school pupils and linked to this to evaluate the contribution made by their mothers. The data was gained by interviewing girls and their mothers from two suburban primary schools and one rural primary school.

There are two distinct but interwoven themes: a) the girls' lives at primary school; b) the mothers' perceptions of their daughters' education and how they relate to their daughters' own schools within the education system. The main focus is on the part played by social class in determining both the attitudes of the girls and their mothers. This is linked to Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of 'cultural capital', 'habitus' and 'field'. These contextualise the social and cultural actions of the individual which are not seen in isolation and both the social groups' or social institutions' roles are balanced with that of the individual.

The research argues that social class still plays a major determining role in the educational expectations for girls and affects the tensions between home and school cultures. The girls' mothers play a significant part in their daughters' perceptions and attitudes towards schooling and education - notably via the expectations they have for them. These, too, are affected by the educational background and the social class of the mothers whose views and attitudes, to a great extent, are a direct result of their own experiences.

# CHAPTER ONE

## **Introduction.**

This research is primarily concerned with investigating how girls perceive their primary education – what influences them and what affects their perceptions. The aim is to try and discover how girls perceive themselves as primary school pupils and linked to this to evaluate the contribution made by their mothers in helping to construct these perceptions.

The emphasis is on the role played by the social class of the individual families in determining the attitudes of both the girls and their mothers. Differences in the cultural and social assets of the various families are considered and how these may affect educational achievement. The focus is on how individuals utilise these resources or assets within society to gain advantage – specifically within the sphere of education. Whilst the main emphasis is on the individual, the role played by the social groups or institutions with which they are aligned is also considered. The significance of social class and its link with how each person relates to the education system and individual schools is particularly important in terms of the girls' mothers and the attitudes they develop. It is argued that this has a great bearing on the relationship they have with their daughters' education and thus on how they are able to offer them help and on the nature of the actual support they give. This in turn may well have a significant effect on the girls' educational achievement and own perceptions concerning education and life in school.

The major significance of the social class or cultural background of the families lies at the heart of the theoretical framework that supports this research. This is developed from the work of Pierre Bourdieu whose concepts of various forms of 'capital', including 'cultural capital', are at the core of the perspective. This in turn is linked to his concepts of 'habitus' and 'field' which tie together the social and cultural actions of the individual within the social milieu in which they participate – thus the individuals' actions are

contextualised. They are not seen in isolation and both the social groups' or social institutions' role is balanced with that of the individual.

Lareau(1989) uses Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' as a means of explaining the differing relationships working-class and middle-class parents have with their child's school. She emphasises the significance of the different skills and resources available to the parents depending on their social background and what affect it may have on their child's achievement.

Reay(1998) develops this idea further and also uses the theoretical perspectives of Bourdieu to explain differences in mothers' involvement in their children's schooling. As well as considering 'cultural capital' she includes the concepts of 'habitus' and 'field'. This enables differences between individuals within the same social class grouping to be accounted for and makes the perspective flexible in that the boundaries between different social groups are not perceived as rigid and fixed. Further to this the actions are placed in a social context. In this particular research the framework offered by Bourdieu's concepts allows the complex and ever-changing social and cultural relationships between the individual, their social class and other social institutions to be evaluated in terms of the effect they may have on the individual's education and educational achievements. It also enables women to be included within their own right because there is not the dependency on male occupation as a defining medium of a specific social grouping.

Within this particular research there are two distinct but interwoven themes. The first theme looks at the girls' own interpretations of their lives at primary school. The second theme considers the perceptions the mothers have of their daughters in terms of their education and the relationship they have with the educational system and the individual schools attended by the girls. The first hypothesis put forward is that the social class of the family plays a major role in determining the educational expectations for the girls and also affects the tensions the girls may experience between home and school cultures. The second hypothesis that is explored is that the girls' mothers play a notable role in their

daughters' perceptions and attitudes towards schooling and education. The final hypothesis that is put forward is that the attitudes and views expressed by the mothers concerning education are a direct result of their own experiences.

The starting point of this study is to place the research in context – both in terms of other research and theoretical perspectives. In Chapter Two the general social context is considered and then the two major areas that are at the centre of the research are explored ie. the home and the school context. Relevant research issues concerning each are highlighted. There then follows a detailed consideration of the development of the theoretical perspectives that provide a framework for the research. This focuses on the concept of social class and its reproduction in terms of cultural behaviours and values – specifically related to the individual and the individual's role. It draws on the work of Bourdieu and explores the relationships between individuals, their social class and the context in which their social activities take place.

Chapter Three involves a consideration of the rationale behind the actual research process and a detailed account of the gathering of data. This incorporates the criteria used when selecting the sample of participants to take part in the research and some of the problems faced, and issues raised, when gaining access to the appropriate schools and the individuals who ultimately participated. Wherever possible any ethical concerns that occur are discussed.

Chapter Four includes details about the three schools that were involved in the research. This provides the educational context for the girls who are the focus of this study. Also included is some basic information about each of the girls' family backgrounds and their mothers' educational histories. This places the girls in their family context.

The following chapters are all concerned with the actual analysis of the data gained. Chapter Five focuses on how the girls view the curriculum they are taught at their primary schools. It aims to elicit which subjects are allocated a high or a low status by the girls and what curriculum areas are seen as being relevant or irrelevant to them. Attention

is then turned to what the girls actually enjoy studying in school and areas of the curriculum that give rise to misgivings and concerns. Throughout the emphasis is placed on the reasons the girls give for their views.

Chapter Six turns its attention to the girls themselves and how they perceive their own abilities and other pupils' abilities. Issues explored include: the criteria used by the girls as indicators of ability, their own self-esteem and the criteria their teachers use for judging the girls – frequently using personality and character rather than intellectual abilities as standards of evaluation. Focus is also placed on how family factors can play a major role in the girls' academic lives.

This is followed, in Chapter Seven, by a consideration of the mothers' relationships with their daughters' schools. These are evaluated both in terms of the mothers themselves and also their daughters' class teachers – thus presenting the two sides of the relationship. The emphasis is on the role the mothers actually play, or are allowed to play, in their daughters' schooling.

Chapter Eight explores some of the issues and events that affected the girls' mothers' own education and how these, in turn, may have played a role in structuring their attitudes towards their own daughters' education.

The final chapter, Chapter Nine, draws the threads of the research together and provides a brief summary of the main themes and issues that have emerged.

# **CHAPTER TWO**

## **The Context of the Research and Relevant Theoretical Perspectives.**

### **Introduction.**

This chapter considers the actual context of the research – both in terms of other research and the theoretical context in which it is positioned. The first section of the chapter places the research in a general social context. This is followed by a consideration of the two major areas that are the focal point of the research proper – ie. the school context and the home context. These two are inextricably intertwined but relevant research issues concerning each are highlighted. The final section of the chapter investigates appropriate theoretical perspectives and outlines a suitable theoretical framework to support the research.

### **General Context of the Research.**

In society there are still inequalities between and amongst various sections and some of these inequalities are based on gender. Since the 1970's issues concerning gender have been debated and legislated for, or against, and have often been at the forefront in political or parliamentary discussion. These issues frequently centred around the rights of individuals, or groups, to receive the same rates of pay for carrying out identical work-related tasks or the rights of individuals to take up a job, profession or activity that was designated as a 'male' or 'female' occupation. This was the focus of the 1974 Equal Opportunities legislation.

In many areas debate still continues and frequently courts controversy. This can be illustrated by events in the 1990's involving discriminatory practices in the armed forces – on becoming pregnant many women were forced to resign from their posts or encouraged to seek an abortion. In a number of cases when the issue has been formally

raised and questioned the women concerned have been awarded considerable financial compensation for their loss of career and earnings. This issue of pregnant women in the armed forces appeared in the press at regular intervals throughout 1996. Constantly reoccurring themes are those of single mothers and working mothers – these arouse much contentious political discussion. Concerns raised have linked the child's academic performance to a mother's work situation ie. suggesting that if a mother is working full-time it may have a detrimental effect on her child's academic achievement at school. This contention was highlighted in the 'Panorama' television programme that was broadcast on February 3<sup>rd</sup> 1997. A counter argument appeared in the 'Daily Telegraph' of the same date. At regular intervals throughout the last decade successive governments have raised issues concerning single mothers and whether or not they should work in order to contribute towards the keep of themselves and their children. It would appear that the theme of mothers and work outside the home is an ongoing saga. David(1999) considers this issue in detail, particularly in the light of espoused governmental policies concerning the family in the socio-economic context. One of her main focuses is how this affects the family in terms of having to balance a home life and a work life.

### **The School Context.**

#### **a)Secondary School Issues.**

Educational issues, particularly those involving gender, came more to the fore. These tended to revolve around curricular matters mainly involving girls in the secondary phase of their education. The literature and the points discussed in this section are particularly pertinent and relevant to the girls' mothers and their educational experiences. In terms of this research some of the issues raised, notably those concerning working-class girls, very much affected some of the girls' mothers' education and helped them to formulate many of their views and opinions involving education – and these in turn affected the aspirations they had for their own daughters. Where secondary education was involved the emphasis tended to be placed on the curriculum areas of mathematics, science and



technology. Initiatives such as G.I.S.T.(Girls Into Science and Technology) and G.A.T.E.(Girls And Technology Education) were devised to counteract the imbalance in numbers of girls opting to study these specific subject areas. The National Curriculum is now firmly in place in an attempt to broaden all pupils' range of experiences and bring an element of balance to courses of study. This is facilitated by all pupils following a core curriculum. Educational legislation to ensure equality of opportunity is in place but has it really affected underlying attitudes?

Riddell(1992) concluded that the National Curriculum was unlikely to improve the situation of girls in terms of the choices they ultimately made – those that were likely to affect their choice of career. She indicated that the cultures of the pupils and families played a part in producing gender divisions in the curriculum. The working-class girls tended to make more traditional choices and opt for rather a safe, restricted range of careers. The middle-class girls generally selected a more academic curriculum but were still more likely to opt for arts subjects rather than science subjects. These gender divisions in terms of subject choice were evident in the table produced in the Daily Telegraph of Thursday August 17<sup>th</sup> 2000. Here A-level results are tabulated by grade and gender. Whilst it would appear that girls, on the whole, academically outperformed boys in terms of the grades they attained, there were certain curriculum areas that were under-represented in terms of the number of girls actually opting to pursue that course of study at A-level. Examples of this included: less than a quarter of the pupils who studied computing were females, under one third who studied economics were girls, just over one third of the total number studying mathematics were female, less than one quarter of the pupils who studied physics were girls and under one third of the pupils who pursued studies in technology subjects were female. Inevitably this precluded girls from a significant number of career areas – or rather they are under-represented in these fields.

Delamont(1983) in her article "The Conservative School" considered how important a pupil's own prejudices can be for academic achievement. Similarly Grafton et al(1987)

looked at how pupils made decisions concerning the choice of subjects they studied at school. They indicated that gender played a considerable part in this decision-making process and that girls were frequently channelled into 'taking' certain subjects which possibly stemmed from society's idea that boys were educated for work and girls for domestic life, motherhood and part-time work.

Both Whyte(1985) and Kelly(1987) looked at some of the reasons for girls' underachievement in science and why they frequently possessed negative attitudes towards the subject. The idea of differences in behaviour and self-perceptions was in the forefront of their thinking. Since these pieces of research were completed the situation has somewhat changed – the issue is no longer one of girls actually underachieving in science and related subjects it is more a problem of them opting not to study them when they choose academic areas for further study. This point was highlighted earlier when considering the proportion of boys and girls choosing these subjects to study at A-level.

Griffin(1985), Stanley(1989) and Sharpe(1994) researched how girls view the world and their prospects. Griffin(1985) considers the attitudes, views and opinions of a group of girls who were in the final year of the secondary phase of their education. This research followed the girls from school into their first experiences of the world of work. Considerable emphasis was placed on how their family life affected their job prospects in the 1980's. Some of the girls, particularly the working-class ones, frequently had to take on considerable domestic responsibilities, including looking after younger siblings. In some instances this necessitated absences from school to care for sick, or pre-school, brothers and sisters with the obvious effect on their academic progress. Others curtailed their education, rather than going on to pursue further qualifications, in order to take up employment to ensure more financial income in their households. This work carried out by Griffin(1985) is particularly pertinent in terms of the mothers who participated in this research. They underwent the secondary phase of their education during the 1970's to the mid-1980's. In a similar vein Sharpe(1994) studied issues concerning girls during the

secondary stage of their education. Her initial research was carried out in 1972 and then she returned to the same schools twenty years later to see if there were any marked changes in the girls' attitudes and perceptions. She contended that since her first piece of research girls themselves had changed and were more aware of gender issues and rights and focused more on their own needs. However she suggested that, despite these factors, there were no indications that there was a very marked expansion in job expectations and rather gloomily concluded that girls in the nineties were just as likely to face the same hindrances and prejudices as their predecessors.

In contrast to Sharpe(1994), a more positive view concerning girls and their schooling is expressed by Arnot et al(1999). They emphasise how, in terms of educational achievement in school, there has been a decline in the relative advantage of boys over girls and the gender gap is now in favour of girls. The girls' achievements in literacy and communication skills put them in a strong position in the new technological and cultural industries. In contrast the place of schooling in boys' lives has been transformed particularly in terms of the loss of the traditional transitions from school to work and by the replacement of traditional skill-based apprenticeships. Boys have had to adapt their personal and occupational choices and this has proved more difficult for them to do than girls. Arnot et al(1999) emphasise that with the wider social changes and technological developments the traditional role of the woman in a patriarchal family has altered. The freeing of women from the cult of femininity, domesticity and the traditional family allied to increases in women's employment has resulted in a shift in girls' aspirations. Many see school as a potential for offering them the chance of more freedom and new opportunities to enter paid employment. In particular many working-class girls express the desire for upward social mobility.

With the most recent reforms in education Arnot et al(1999) point out that pupils are required to engage in the improvement of their academic performance and that educational success is predominantly measured by the number of qualifications achieved

at the age of sixteen. This shift in educational values has been successfully exploited by girls. Despite the girls' relative success in terms of educational achievement Arnot et al(1999) highlight that they feel that this success hides the continuing significance of class inequalities in society. In their view class and racial differences in educational opportunities are condoned not reduced.

Burwood(1992) explored whether or not the National Curriculum would help to reduce working-class underachievement. He indicated that in the past working-class pupils had experienced difficulties where there was a very subject-based curriculum. The conclusion he drew was that if the National Curriculum were to succeed in terms of working-class children the approach the individual teachers adopted would be of paramount importance. They needed to present the curriculum in relevant forms to the pupils and try to reduce the gap between the classroom experience and the everyday experience of the children.

These pieces of research referred to secondary school pupils and indicated issues that affected the education of the girls' mothers. These were factors that particularly caused them concern and played a role in formulating the views they expressed concerning their own daughters' education. Indeed, some of these concerns may well prove to be of significance for the girls themselves in the future.

#### b)Primary School Issues.

However, I now wish to turn my attention to issues that may affect girls during the primary stages of their education because it is from early perceptions formulated both at home and school that future decisions and ideas are derived and they provide the building blocks for the future. The literature and the points raised in this section are specifically applicable to the girls' own experiences at school.

Before a child starts his/her formal education at school he/she has an awareness of cultural norms in relation to gender and has quite a definite concept of self in terms of gender identity(Lloyd and Duveen 1992). This self-concept has developed in the home environment and school will continue to exert a major influence on further development.

Davies(1989) researched four and five year olds at nursery school and the way in which they constructed their gender identity using their play, conversations and interpretations of feminist stories. Similarly Lloyd and Duveen(1992) focused on pupils during the first year of schooling and looked at how children came to negotiate a social gender identity. They focused on the nature of groups during play activities and also on the types of activity in which boys and girls were likely to participate. They concluded that the children's practical activity was greatly influenced by their social gender identity. Emphasis was also placed on the part played by societal norms and the social world of the child (home and school) in contributing to a child's self-perception. A final conclusion reached by Lloyd and Duveen(1992) was that social gender divisions and social gender identities reflect the influence of existing social orders.

It is possible that the primary school plays a significant role in gender construction and socialisation. There are still activities within school, both academic and social, that are linked to gender. Boys and girls exhibit differential rates of achievement and skills, frequently choosing different play activities and usually opting for single sex play groups. Differential treatment reinforces different behaviours. Further to this the actual informal peer culture of pupils reinforces what is seen as being appropriate behaviour for boys and girls. These issues involving school culture and its effects on the construction of gender identity were investigated by Delamont(1990) and Measor and Sikes(1992).

Francis(1998) considers how primary school children construct gender and the implications this may have for them in terms of attitudes and behaviours within the classroom. She indicates that the children construct gender as oppositional – girls are expected to be sensible and selfless whereas boys are expected to be silly and selfish. Visual signs and behaviour which signify gender identity are used by the children to achieve a gender position. Generally the children construct power as male and assertion and confrontation conflict with the dominant construction of femininity. This means that in mixed sex interaction the boys' construction of masculinity becomes a source of power

whereas the girls' oppositional constructions become a source of potential powerlessness. In many instances the girls may feel that the boys' use of power is intimidatory but they tend to 'suffer in silence' and accept this as normal male behaviour and choose to ignore it. In conclusion Francis(1998) indicates that gender constructions potentially empower boys and disempower girls.

When investigating how and why the girls see themselves as they do at school it is important to consider their views of the curriculum they are taught. The teaching of the curriculum is one of the major roles of the school and the academic outcome may well have some considerable bearing on the girls' future lives and achievements.

In considering the curriculum it is important to focus on the areas that the girls find most and least enjoyable. This may well then indicate where individual interests lie and thus show where the girls channel their energies and place most of their attention. Very much linked to this is the value the girls place on the different curriculum areas – what in their eyes are important subject areas and why. What do they view as being of lesser significance? How they rationalise their views and the relevance they attribute to different aspects of their learning within the school may well affect their attitude and approach to given tasks. This in turn could affect decisions they make in their later academic and adult lives.

Despite all children now, in theory, experiencing the same form of primary curriculum many of the same problems remain in terms of attitude towards different subject areas. This issue was explored by Davies and Brember(2001). They considered primary school children's attitude development. They concluded that differences in gender preferences, in terms of curriculum subjects, were still maintained – notably they gradually became more marked towards the end of the primary phase of education. A worrying point that they highlighted was that in the junior years girls were starting to become more negative about the curriculum they were being taught.

Issues surrounding the effectiveness of the National Curriculum have been explored by Galton(2000). He expressed particularly negative views concerning its advantages. He considered that many of the same problems exist as prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum. One of the major difficulties children face is the transition between primary and secondary school. He indicated that there was still a lack of continuity between the two stages of education. These were also concerns voiced by both the girls and the mothers who participated in this research.

An integral part of the National Curriculum is assessment and this has affected the actual nature of the curriculum and the teaching methods adopted. James(2000) and McDonald(2001) focus on this aspect of education. They both indicate that the 'tests' are a major source of concern for many pupils and this can be detrimental to their progress. James(2000) highlights how the approaches towards teaching in the primary school have changed. There is a pressure to 'fit in' work and the focus is on performance. She indicates that there is less emphasis on pastoral care and this can also be linked to an increase in child anxieties.

Possibly one of the most important aspects for an individual is whether or not they see themselves positively or negatively. This could affect their approach and attitude to all aspects of their schooling. It is important to bear in mind how the girls view their own abilities as this may indicate how positively the girls see their achievements and skills.

Licht and Dweck(1987) considered the idea of self-image and achievement-related beliefs concerning classroom work. The researchers indicated that girls frequently underestimated their chances of success and that there were definite differences in the type of task boys and girls sought within the classroom.

During the early years at primary school children view certain activities and occupations as being linked to gender – some tasks are deemed more appropriate for men and others more appropriate for women. However, by the time they are coming to the end of their primary school careers, they are aware of issues concerning stereotyping and

discrimination(Short and Carrington 1989). Despite this awareness they do still voice ideas concerning certain professions and types of employment as being more suitable for men or women. In a small scale study Henshaw et al(1992) indicated that children clearly differentiate activities and occupations they see as appropriate for males and females. Steedman(1982) looks at primary school girls' perceptions of what they think adult life will be like for them. The data stems from a story written by a small group of working-class girls. They wrote about the type of house they may have and the work they may do. Their views are very much coloured by how they see their own parents and family living. By looking at these different facets of school life it may be possible to build up a picture of how the girls feel they experience school life and what influences them concerning the perceptions they have involving their own education.

#### **The Home Context with Specific Reference to the Role of the Mother.**

Having considered some of the issues that could possibly affect the girls within the school context attention is now turned to the home context. This section specifically looks at the relationship between the home and the school. The focus is on the mothers' roles and the significance of their relationship with their daughters' schools and how this may play a part in the girls' education.

The mothers' own perceptions of education in general and, more specifically, of their daughters' individual schools may affect their attitudes and the views they may express. External factors such as issues highlighted in the media may well play a role in helping to shape the mothers' views concerning education or, at least, focus their attention on aspects of the education system. High profile coverage of events such as the breakdown of discipline at the Ridings School, the rejection of A-level student Laura Spence by Oxford University despite gaining top grade passes and the derogatory comments passed by politicians concerning comprehensive schools could not fail to provoke comment or thoughts.



The publishing of 'league tables of achievement' for primary schools may no doubt further colour parental opinions concerning individual schools. At present 'official' sources of information open to personal interpretation include items such as OFSTED school inspection reports, governors' annual report to parents, parents' evenings, individual school reports and events such as school concerts and functions organised by PTA groups. All of these are likely to help to create or 'colour' a mother's perceptions of her daughter's school. Information can also be gained from more informal sources ie. conversations with other parents, their own daughters and other children attending the school. These all help in the creation of impressions or an overall picture.

The mothers' own educational experiences will affect their attitudes towards education and the views they express. Each mother's own personal educational history may well play a part in the development of her perceptions and opinions. Understanding of educational processes and activities will be affected by the nature and extent of the individual mother's own involvement within the education system. In a similar vein differences would be anticipated between those viewing their own educational experiences positively and those viewing them negatively.

Depending on their own educational and social background the mothers may well perceive education differently. This may be shown by the relative importance and significance they attribute to different areas of the curriculum and aspects of schooling. Some may be given particular relevance and others discounted.

Again linked to their own educational and social background the mothers may well have different expectations for their daughters in terms of their education. If a mother's own experience of the education system has been somewhat limited the aspirations expressed for her daughter may also be somewhat restricted. No doubt all of the mothers will want their own child to succeed but their perceptions of success could well vary. What is viewed as 'normal' educational achievement in one family may well be viewed in a different light in another family. Inevitably this will affect a child's views and

expectations. Family background could well be a determinant in how mothers perceive schooling for their daughters.

From whatever background a child comes there will more than likely be some tensions and frictions between home and school cultures. These will vary from comparatively trivial to quite major rifts – the degree and nature of these will be linked to the child's family background and the ethos of the school. How these tensions are accommodated and dealt with is of major importance – again this will vary according to the child's social background. Of great significance will be the ideas from home and school that are either accepted or rejected by the individual girls.

One of the main themes of this research is the mother's role in her child's education. Generally the school and family are seen as two separate and distinct areas of research. However, at the present time, parents are expected to play a more active role in their child's education and are seen as 'consumers' concerning the education process. Bowe, Gewirtz and Ball(1994) consider the notion of parents being viewed as consumers and the idea of consumer power being represented as parental choice. They conclude that this is a politically constructed ideal to make education accountable. The idea of 'choice', an integral part of government policy, is seen as central to school reform. It is viewed as a means of parents playing a part in making schools more efficient and raising standards. The emphasis is on parents being 'active choosers' and taking responsibility for their child's educational future. Bowe, Gewirtz and Ball (1994) also express misgivings about how 'choice' is portrayed and feel that little attention is paid to how parents and children make choices and that the social context in which families live are ignored. They conclude that the end result of the 'choice process' is that opportunities are provided for some and constraints for others. This issue is explored by Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe(1995) who indicate that 'choice' is a new factor in maintaining and reinforcing social-class divisions and inequalities. They perceive the 'choice factor' as being directly and powerfully related to social-class differences. Success in the 'market system' of education

is not mainly connected to family motivation but to parental skills, social and material advantages. Middle-class parents are more likely to become involved in the market and are best skilled to exploit it to their child's advantage. Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe(1995) conclude that schools are becoming more oriented towards meeting what are seen as the demands of middle-class parents and that there is a growing inequality of access to the quality of provision necessary for all children to succeed within the education system.

The issue of differences in the ways families from different social backgrounds approach the process of 'choice' in terms of schooling is explored by Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz(1995). They indicate that where working-class parents are concerned the child's wishes are more often decisive and family organisation can be a constraint. In contrast where middle-class parents are involved the organisation of the family provides less of a constraint and the child's input in the choice process is likely to be more limited. Generally speaking parents from different social backgrounds are oriented culturally and materially differently towards the education market and expect different things from it. The working-class families tend to focus on the practical and immediate whereas the middle-class families focus on the ideal and advantageous. All in all the middle-class parents take full advantage of 'the market' to sustain their class advantages. Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz(1995) conclude that members of different social classes use the 'choice' process to maintain or improve their position in the structure of class relations.

On the whole, where young children are concerned, the mothers are expected to take responsibility and the emphasis is on the mother's role in assisting their child's educational, social and moral progress. David(1993) considered the increased emphasis on the role of the mother and looked at the historical background concerning changes in home/school relations. She concluded that public policy, to a great extent, determines the relations between home and school and that the boundaries between the two have changed – having pronounced implications for the mothers' role in terms of their expected contribution towards their child's education.

Ribbens(1993) developed this theme further and looked at the mothers' perspective – how they saw the boundary between home and school and how they dealt with any tensions that arose. She considered the differences in the mothers' views concerning home and school experiences – whether or not there should be continuity or a definite boundary. Emphasis was placed on the implications for mothers where the boundaries were flexible or actually crossed over.

Home-school relationships were explored in detail by Vincent(1996) who concluded that parental participation in school life was mainly limited to individual parents rather than the majority of the parent body. Further to this the involvement was generally restricted to carrying out specific curricular, or extra-curricular, tasks which have been designated by teachers. In other words rather than a relationship of 'equals' the teacher plays the dominant role – particularly in the case of working-class parents.

The idea of social class affecting the parents' relationship with their child's school is investigated by Lareau(1989). She concluded that there were marked differences that had very noticeable effects on the nature of the pupils' school experiences. Where working-class families were concerned there was definite separation between family life and the activities carried out in educational institutions. On the other hand the two were very much interconnected in middle-class homes. Also middle-class parents intervened more frequently in their child's schooling and tried to influence classroom performance by individualising their own child's school experiences.

Walkerdine and Lucey(1989) explored the idea that society constructs the image of the 'good' and 'sensitive' mother who is vital in the production of a 'normal' family. They concluded that this ideal is a historically constructed phenomenon which can be viewed as oppressive to mothers as they strive to attain it. The overall effect is that women from working-class backgrounds and middle-class backgrounds undergo different forms of social regulation. The writers considered the varying approaches mothers from different social backgrounds had when confronted with learning situations within the home and the

possible implications this may have in terms of their daughters' attitudes and achievements at school.

A very personal insight into a mother and daughter relationship was presented by Carolyn Steedman(1986) in which she analysed her relationship with her own mother and looked at, and tried to explain, the pattern of her own life. She looked at how her own mother's past and ambitions affected how she approached the upbringing of her own daughters. Comparisons were made between the writer's own life and that of her mother's. Again the idea of presenting the public image of a 'good' mother frequently surfaces. Vivid autobiographical images are portrayed of the writer's own schooldays and the role her mother played in her education.

In terms of the particular piece of research I am carrying out the data used is gained from the educational life histories of mothers and daughters. It is hoped that by looking at these it will be possible to ascertain how, if at all, the girls' mothers have influenced them in terms of their outlooks and attitudes towards their schooling.

### **The Theoretical Context.**

In the previous two sections attention was focused on the two main contexts which play a role in affecting the girls' education. The emphasis was on the interrelationship between them. This section builds up a suitable theoretical framework to link these two contexts and support the research. Initially the focus is on the individuals and how they make sense of their lives. Attention then moves outwards to place the individual in a wider societal context.

The different life experiences and educational experiences individuals have are a result of the interplay between many variable factors such as their race, their social class, their gender, their religion and their culture. Variables such as these play an integral part in the development of a person's self-perceptions and each exerts a unique and vital influence. If a balanced account is to be achieved these facets should not be ignored. This issue is considered by Gewirtz(1991) who supports the importance of adopting an integrated

approach in terms of academic research. She raises the idea that academics can sometimes impose false boundaries between areas such as race, class or gender when pursuing their research interests.

The importance of the interaction with others in constructing an identity is examined by Reay(1991). She indicates that gender identities and perceptions are not uniform and consistent across different racial and class groupings. Value is placed on how individuals construct their own identities and self-images by using different interactions they may have with other individuals or social groups.

The idea is considered in detail by Nias(1989) when she explores how teachers maintain a sense of self in their professional lives. She emphasises how everyone has different life experiences and therefore see the world and how they fit into it in different ways. Their own attitudes and actions are founded in their individual ways of perceiving the world. Each person orders and makes sense of the world around him/herself by perceiving events, other people and various behaviours and then internally classifying and organising them. This classification process is flexible and can be modified by experience and activity. In this way the girls at school make sense of their own position as individual girls attending a school undergoing the process of education. Nias(1989) points out that an individual's awareness of how others see him/her is vital in how that person actually sees him/herself. She supports the view that the concept of 'self' has two distinct parts – the situational self which can be equated with the 'object' and the substantial self which can be equated with the 'subject'. The situational self is socially constructed and varies with context. It is linked with the individual as a social animal and is derived from interaction with others and the influences of others and groups who are significant in some way to the individual. Nias(1989) indicates that the substantial self does not depend on social conditioning in the same way as the situational self. It is equated with beliefs, values and attitudes that are internalised within the individual – ie. the essential self or how the individual actually perceives him/herself. This is the self that acts according to

feelings and emotions – the independent self capable of acting without reference to others.

This idea of a sense of self is very important and links very much with the idea of girls' perceptions of their life at primary school. How they see themselves at school – their self-image is very significant. The importance of this is emphasised by Cook(1984) who feels that understanding the girls' self-image may go some way to explaining why girls behave in certain ways and develop specific attitudes towards different facets of their schooling. It is the underlying reasons the girls have for their attitudes and behaviour that are of particular significance.

There is also a need to consider the image the girls portray to others as this will give a fuller picture and perhaps a greater understanding of the girls themselves. In this context the image portrayed to someone else of significance ie. their mothers, assumes importance. How individuals present themselves to others, or wish to be seen by others, is considered by Goffman(1959) – the conclusion being drawn that the image portrayed is very much dependent on the nature of the social relations and the actual context where the social interaction is taking place. In this instance the mothers' images of their daughters may well have considerable restrictions concerning the school context. However, many of the impressions they have may well be obtained directly from their daughters and therefore they are significant as they are perhaps what the girls want their mothers to know ie. the perceived image they find acceptable for their mothers to possess.

Brown and Gilligan(1992) explore women's psychological development in what they describe as patriarchal societies dominated by male-voiced cultures. They conclude that this process has the potential to be inherently traumatic. As young girls approach adolescence there are social pressures on them to conform to the underlying culture of what are perceived by society to be the dominant traits of the 'ideal woman'. This is epitomised by the change from feeling able to speak freely and indulge in open conflict to developing more covert ways of responding to situations and relationships with others.

Brown and Gilligan(1992) describe this as a “loss of voice” as the girls begin to suppress their views and feelings and avoid conflict situations. Strong voices and open disagreement are not traits that are actively encouraged where girls are concerned. Indeed, the girls may be urged to be quiet and behave like good little girls by the adult women around them who are, in fact, their role models. This situation may well be mirrored in the classroom where certain behaviours are either encouraged or discouraged. Brown and Gilligan(1992) conclude that in many ways girls and young women are given the message that their experiences and knowledge are not heard or even welcomed in some classrooms. They are expected to be quiet and acquiescent and need to avoid conflict.

Davies and Banks(1992) have looked at the ways in which children make sense of their own lived experiences. They consider how the children interpret their own lives and the interpretation they make of others’ lives. They conclude that the children’s interpretations show a correlation between accepting the dominant discourses about gender that are available to them and accepting adult/parent authority as correct and well-meaning. The children’s interpretations of their experiences indicate a consistency and continuity and this in turn gives them a sense of control over their lives.

In a similar manner Wexler(1992) studies how high school pupils from different socio-economic backgrounds use social relations to give meaning to their lives. He is particularly concerned with the interrelationship between the school and the wider society. He indicates that the pupils use their relationships and social contacts with their peers to define themselves as members of what almost appear to be subcultures within the overall school culture. These ‘subcultures’ have certain characteristics that distinguish the various individual members from other pupils who are not incorporated within that social group. These characteristics may include a certain style of dressing, specific behavioural traits, participation in certain activities or the promotion of specific attitudes. Using these the pupils define the approach they adopt towards their life and achievements in school.



Very much linked to this is the nature of the family socio-economic backgrounds of the individual pupils. Wexler(1992) shows that pupils from poorer, more deprived socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to develop 'anti-school cultures' and find it more difficult to relate to and 'fit in' with the culture espoused within the school - they are more geared to academic failure. In contrast pupils coming from higher status socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to expect academic success and thus see themselves as high achievers – they find it easier to accommodate the behaviours and ideals that are expected within the school.

In a similar vein Holly(1985) considers the perceptions of a group of ten year old girls and researches their conversations. These indicate an intuitive grasp of social pressures that shape their lives. From the comments the girls themselves make she concludes that they understand the nature of sexism and how it immediately affects them, particularly within school, but they do not see it as an inevitable part of their lives. They see the possibilities for change.

The emphasis in this research is on how individual girls interpret their lives at school and the image they have of themselves. Alison Jones(1993) strongly endorses the importance of individuals' active roles in organising their own lives when she considers the differences within groups of girls as being complex and ever changing. How girls see themselves in the settings that directly affect them is of paramount importance. This includes both the home and school environment – the interplay between these two being of great significance where the perceptions and formation of self-images are concerned. The issue that is of most importance is that a girl's role and social position is not fixed forever and meanings change according to circumstances and situations – social or otherwise. Maynard(1990) emphasises that girls and women should no longer be considered 'passive victims' of society. It is important that individuals are seen as active participants in society in their attempts to make sense of their own world and define their identity.

When considering the wider social context and how individuals define their own way of belonging and fitting into the social world it is virtually impossible to ignore a person's own social background ie. their social class. In many ways the concept of social class proves problematic as it is mostly defined in terms of men and is generally based on work outside the domestic arena. The family is the usual unit of analysis and, on the whole, social position is determined by the occupation of the male head of the household(Beechey 1985 and Harris 1985). The economic function of the man thus determines social position. Because of the variety of possible familial arrangements care has to be taken to incorporate the woman's occupation when considering class analysis. In terms of this particular research the present occupation, or previous occupation, of the women is included in the analysis. However, there is the anomaly, in terms of occupation, of women who do not work outside the home – how is domestic labour categorised? (Oakley 1990). To alleviate the previous complications, wherever possible, I have placed the emphasis on the educational backgrounds of the girls' mothers rather than their occupations. This also links with the fact that I am considering both the girls' and mothers' perceptions of their education and so keeps the research within an educational context and background.

In terms of this particular research the social class categorisations used, when appropriate, incorporated the division into working-class and middle-class backgrounds. Whilst accepting the categorisation of families and individuals into 'social class' groups is problematic in that the boundaries between the different groups are difficult to define with certainty, there are traits that are perhaps more likely to be prevalent in one social group/class than another. Details concerning the family background of each of the girls participating in this research are outlined in Chapter Four and details of the mothers' educational and work careers are indicated in the charts in the Appendix. The social class grouping was arrived at by using a composite of parents' occupations, parents' educational backgrounds and the nature of the housing the various families at the focus of

the research occupied. The occupations of both the mothers and the fathers were considered in the light of the Registrar General's classification – this ranged from the professions through to unskilled work. Housing status considered whether or not the families owned or rented their homes. In terms of educational backgrounds the emphasis was placed on the mothers' educational careers – considering the actual duration of their educational careers and what, if any, academic or professional qualifications were obtained.

In terms of the families who participated in this research certain characteristics seemed to occur in combination with each other – some parents participated in unskilled work, possessed few or no academic or professional qualifications and lived in rented accommodation. In contrast other parents pursued a 'profession', possessed academic or professional qualifications and owned their own house. These categories were not totally exclusive to a specific social group and where there was an 'anomaly' in terms of an individual or a certain family this is indicated in the text of the research account.

In the 1970's Bernstein researched the links between schools and education and the context of society as a whole (Bernstein 1972, 1974). He considered this in terms of social inequality and the impact it had on educational outcomes. His standpoint was that children took to school conceptual patterns that they had acquired through socialisation in their families. These were perceived to be linked to the class system and pupils from lower socio-economic classes were found to have more limited vocabularies and poorer analytical abilities than children in higher socio-economic groupings. This earlier work of Bernstein failed to account for the differing social experiences of both boys and girls. However, in later work by Bernstein (1982) there are some references to gender as being significant.

Althusser (1971), in a Marxist interpretation, related education and schooling to the needs of production and perceived the school as an agency through which the ruling ideology was transmitted – the aim being to produce appropriate behaviour for waged labour and

teach skills that were required for future occupation. The focus of the schools' ideology was very much class linked and in a similar way the family was seen as a source of the reproduction of labour power. The inadequacy of Althusser's theory revolved around the issue that the emphasis was on the successful socialisation of pupils into the existing social order and that it assumed that education was successful in achieving this. He did not indicate that there was some scope for change – particularly individual changes. Further to this he ignored the ways schools transmit masculine and feminine identities and did not recognise the reproduction of sexist practices across the social classes.

In a similar vein to Althusser, Bowles and Gintis(1976) indicated that schools reflect the dominant economic structure in society and there is a concentration on differential socialisation by the school system in producing the dominant and the dominated classes. Schools teach the children of the wealthy to be managerial and autonomous but on the other hand children from lower social classes are taught to be subservient and obedient workers. The idea of cultural and economic reproduction indicates that everyone knows their place in the hierarchy of production. It is argued that schools give differential messages to pupils from different social classes. A criticism of Bowles and Gintis' work is that they do not account for gender differentiation within social classes. Also, in a similar manner to Althusser, they do not include the social organisation of the family and the ways this organisation affects the girls within the family, the school and waged labour.

The theories discussed so far, despite their shortcomings, do provide important insights about the macro-level functioning of schooling. They also indicate that the determinants of school failure are not necessarily located within the motivations and abilities of individuals but in the process and objectives of the institutions within society. The view that the State is intimately linked to educational processes and objectives is also made clear in that it is a key institution in generating, regulating and maintaining social relations.

McDonald(1980) looked at the ways schooling contributed to maintaining the sexual division of labour within the production process and the home. She explored gender and class issues and linked these with the social division of labour. Her emphasis was placed on the part school plays in transmitting and modifying definitions of gender. A link was shown between the patriarchal relations in the family with the social relations of the work place. This was particularly the case where working-class women were concerned. Within the family situation the woman was more than likely destined to play a subordinate role in that she was expected to run the home and care for the family but was dependent on the 'male head of household' to be the 'breadwinner' and support her and the family. This subordinate role was mirrored in the work place in that the working-class women frequently saw that their main role was in the home and took on unskilled, low paid work outside the domestic arena. Waged labour was not given a priority and was often viewed as being perhaps of a temporary nature because if family circumstances decreed they would leave to indulge in unpaid domestic labour within the home.

Arnot(1983) looked at the issue of co-education and single sex schools and in particular investigated the idea that schools reproduce class relations and specific concepts of masculinity and femininity. One of her main concerns was to try and uncover the hidden forms of reproduction of gender relations that take place within the education system.

Weiner(1986) suggested that gender inequalities in education are not just the lack of skills and resources needed for educational success but are mainly linked to conflicting economic interests in society. In a similar manner David(1980) considered the link between the State, education and the family. School is seen as the institution that links with the family in the maintenance of domestic and social relations. The State is seen as giving responsibility to the parents, in particular the mother, for the conditions of a child's education and health.

In terms of this research the work of Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist, is of particular significance. He explores the concept of social class but sees it as a much wider

issue than just the categorisation of individuals by occupation and links the concept to culture as a whole. Bourdieu(1977,1984) sees social class as providing each individual with resources that can be utilised in order to gain advantage in social institutions. The social class of an individual, to a large extent, is the determinant of the cultural resources that are available to him/her. These resources are referred to as 'cultural capital' and include the likes of language, cultural experiences, knowledge of the Arts and music. To a considerable degree family life plays a major role in providing aspects of 'cultural capital'. This in turn may be used by individuals to improve their social standing which is linked to educational and social outcomes.

Families from different social backgrounds and having different educational experiences are likely to have differing attitudes towards education and schooling. This is likely to be reflected in the support they are able to offer their children in terms of their education. The support offered is highly likely to reflect the 'cultural capital' of the different family social circumstances – the middle-class families usually offering a more extensive range of support than the working-class families.

Bourdieu(1977) and Bourdieu and Passeron(1977) consider 'cultural capital' in terms of schooling and conclude that schools emphasise certain social and cultural resources more than others. These often involve specific forms of language, certain modes of authority and discipline, certain types of curricula and the approaches towards the teaching of them. The social arrangements and forms of these are likely to be familiar to pupils from the middle and upper social classes and therefore they are advantaged compared to pupils from lower social groupings. This highlights that the different cultural experiences of children affect how they adjust to life in school and in turn may well influence academic achievement.

Bourdieu(1993) indicates that individuals possess other forms of capital as well as 'cultural capital'. These too may be used to gain advantage or disadvantage within society as a whole. The most obvious of these is 'economic capital' which alludes to an

individual's wealth in terms of actual financial assets. This is gained by a person's interaction with the economy.

It is highly likely that the financial assets of middle-class families are greater than those of working-class families. Some working-class families may well struggle financially and therefore their ability to fund certain activities is severely limited – their priorities lie elsewhere. In terms of education middle-class families are more likely to be able to pay for cultural outings, holidays abroad, 'extra' lessons, extra-curricular activities, the acquisition of books and computers. It is a case of them converting 'economic capital' into 'cultural capital' where their child's education is concerned – to gain educational advantage for their children.

Another form of capital is described as 'symbolic capital' which is very much focused around the individual and their own prestige and qualities linked to their personality. These may include personal authority and status, charismatic properties and the dynamism projected by the specific individual. The final form of capital that Bourdieu(1993) identifies is referred to as 'social capital'. This emanates from the working social processes between the family, or individual person, and the wider society. Bourdieu(1993) views society as being made up of a variety of social networks in which people are able to participate. The degree to which they participate and the social networks in which they are involved, to a greater or lesser extent, determine their 'social capital'.

To a great extent the social networks within which families are involved will be determined by their social background. They are more likely to socialise with people from similar backgrounds with similar cultural interests and tastes. There is a high probability that middle-class families may move in social circles involving people from professional backgrounds who have themselves received a reasonably high standard of education. This is perhaps in contrast to many working-class families and the social circles in which they are involved. One of the results of this will be that middle-class

families reinforce their status in terms of 'cultural capital' by their standing in terms of 'social capital' – they are therefore advantaged both culturally and socially. In this way the middle-class children enter school with certain cultural and social advantages and are also advantaged in terms of the education process.

Each person may well possess differing proportions of these various types of capital. An individual may rate highly in terms of one source of capital but be rated much lower where another source is concerned. In differing circumstances or social groups the various forms of 'capital' may be regarded as being more, or less, significant. Within some social groups 'economic capital' may be considered to be most important whereas in different social circles 'cultural capital' would carry the most significance.

Bourdieu(1990a, 1990b) indicates that certain essential aspects of culture are, in his view, embodied. They are incorporated and internalised within the actual individual. This he defines as the 'habitus' which gives rise to a person's tendencies to think, feel and behave in particular ways. Really it is how each individual would normally relate to the world around him/herself. The concept of 'habitus' allows for individuality and difference between individuals who are members of the same cultural group. However when individuals are members of a particular cultural group there are certain behaviours that are expected of them – ie. there is a degree of conformity and uniformity within the group. People behave in ways that are expected of them in the cultural milieu to which they belong. Even though the concept of 'habitus' imbues an individualism to social behaviours the 'habitus' of individual people in the same group exhibits a degree of congruence. However, it is unclear how much comparative significance Bourdieu places on the individual compared to the group persona.

Bourdieu(1990a,1990b) endows the idea of 'habitus' with a dynamic and flexible quality by incorporating the concept of 'field'. This is the context in which the social practices and interactions take place. An individual's behaviours may vary and significantly change



according to the context ie. the manifestations of the 'habitus' are therefore, to a notable extent, dependent on the 'field' in which it is interacting.

Lareau(1989) explores the influence of social class on the way parents become involved in their child's schooling and also how the family background may affect the child's life chances. In relation to this she focuses on the work of Bourdieu – specifically his concept of 'cultural capital'. She indicates that there are definite differences in how working-class and middle-class parents relate to their child's school and education in general. She characterises the working-class relationship as being 'separated' ie. home and school are two distinct and separate spheres and the middle-class relationship as being 'interconnected' ie' the home and school spheres overlap and are very much connected. On the whole she emphasises that all of the parents in her study, irrespective of social background, place value on education and educational success. The difference between the working-class families and the middle-class families lies in their differing skills and resources for improving their child's performance in terms of their schooling. Lareau(1989) equates this with Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital' in that social class endows families with social resources that they are able to utilise to gain advantages for their children at school. She emphasises that even though people may have similar cultural resources they may not make the same gains with them. Somebody possessing high status cultural resources does not automatically make the best use of them to acquire advantage. These resources, in Lareau's view, have to be 'activated' effectively.

Reay(1998) also investigates parental involvement in their children's schooling – specifically the mother's involvement. She considers how the mother's own life and educational experiences have influenced their participation. The significance of social class is emphasised as a key aspect in upholding educational differences and reproducing social inequality. Home-school relationships, particularly involving the mothers, are highlighted as being a major factor in social class reproduction.

In a similar vein to Lareau(1989), Reay(1998) concludes that working-class parents are just as involved in their child's education as their middle-class counterparts but their practices are less effective and they appear to have less power to directly influence their child's schooling. She emphasises that the contexts and resources are different and that the schools themselves have varying expectations of the involvement of parents. Using Bourdieu's concepts of 'cultural capital' and 'habitus' Reay(1998) highlights the point that it is not the women's activities that make the difference to the child's schooling but the actual context and availability of resources. She also focuses on the class character of the catchment areas in which individual schools are situated as being particularly significant. The nature of the separate schools and their influence is designated as 'institutional habitus'. Using Bourdieu's concepts in this manner Reay(1998) is able to explore the influence the mothers have in terms of their children's schooling with respect to both their own social actions and the effect of the social groups and institutions to which they are connected. These are all placed within the appropriate context thus allowing for individual differences within social groupings to be accounted for.

In this particular research the theoretical perspectives offered by Bourdieu's concepts of the various forms of 'capital' including 'cultural capital', and the concepts of 'habitus' and 'field' provide a flexible framework. It allows for both individual and social group responses and actions to be accounted for and included in the analysis. The idea of social class being rigidly linked to male occupations is removed and the whole concept becomes more fluid and allows for individual differences to be taken into account. Whilst Bourdieu does not explicitly highlight the position of women within his theories the perspective posited enables them to be included and it is possible for the female role(s) to be incorporated within the perspective. Further to this the whole idea of social class behaviours being reproduced becomes less rigid and the role of the individual gains a higher profile – particularly bearing in mind the individual 'habitus' rather than the group or institutional 'habitus'. However, that does not mean that these are ignored in terms of

the effect they bring to bear on each person. Another notable aspect is that the significance of the context in which the social actions of individuals and groups take place is highlighted. The whole perspective is dynamic – incorporating the individual acting within society or social groups, the role of social institutions and how they ‘act on’ the individual and, finally, the variability of the context in which social actions are played out and how it affects the outcomes.

# CHAPTER THREE

## **The Research Process and Data Gathering.**

### **Introduction.**

This chapter is concerned with looking at the rationale behind the research method used and then outlining the process of gathering the data. The first section focuses on the actual research rationale. Attention is then turned to the different stages in the data gathering process. The nature of the research sample is outlined and then issues concerning gaining access are discussed. This is followed by a detailed consideration of factors affecting the actual interviews that were carried out.

### **Research Rationale.**

My principal interests concern how girls perceive themselves within the context of their primary school and some of the major influences that affect their views. These influences emanate from their peers, their family, their school and society at large. How these interact together is a complex process. There is no one definitive of the truth but each individual constructs his or her own version – accepting some ideas and rejecting others. Each interpretation of an event or situation belongs to the individual and is fashioned using that individual's own experiences, personal history and environment. How these are blended together and constructed depends on the part played by people in shaping their own lives – their role altering according to the setting and circumstances.

Different roles may describe or interpret the same event or circumstance in a different manner – their personal perspectives being affected by their own unique position. In other words, where people are concerned, there is no one absolute truth but a number of interpretations of the truth depending on the individual's own standpoint. If issues are considered from differing viewpoints a clearer overall picture may emerge. It was with this in mind that this particular piece of research was carried out.

The different perspectives of school girls, their mothers and the girls' class teachers were elicited and considered. To facilitate this I carried out in-depth semi-structured interviews with all of the relevant individuals. This enabled the informants to present their version of the reality of the situation. In the case of the girls I was asking them personally to reconstruct their day to day experiences of school in terms of the curriculum. The two main areas that I focused on during the interviews were the girls' views of the different school subjects that they were taught and their views of their abilities relative to their peers. In the first instance the emphasis on the school curriculum and the girls' views and opinions concerning it had its foundation in the fact that the purported main purpose of a school is to 'deliver the curriculum' – therefore this, to an extent, is the public manifestation/understanding of schooling. From this standpoint the views the girls expressed as individuals on the 'receiving end' of the school process gained credence and relevance. Also it is highly probable that how they saw the curriculum they were taught affected their approaches and attitudes towards various aspects of their schooling ie. how they related to the curriculum. This in turn may well affect the girls' educational outcomes and thus their careers and long term futures – therefore this particular area assumes specific relevance in terms of this research project.

The second area considered, the girls' views of their abilities relative to their peers, also looked at how the girls related to the curriculum but took an even more personalised viewpoint – how the girls saw their own individual abilities. This was very much linked to the girls' self-esteem and how positively or negatively they saw themselves in terms of their own academic performance. The girls' perceptions of their own achievements and self-esteem were significant in that they too may have a considerable bearing on the girls' futures in that they may well affect the decisions they make concerning their own academic careers.

The two main areas investigated tried to deal with how the girls were experiencing life in school at the present time. Although the views expressed were in the here and now they

were also retrospective in that the girls constructed them from experiences they had already had. This issue where past events are reconstructed in the light of present feelings and interpretations is explored by Hitchcock and Hughes(1989).

Schooling or the process of education is a multi-faceted experience. It cannot really be considered as just one all-embracing, isolated experience but rather an ongoing process that is made up of numerous and varied individual and interlinked experiences. An experience can be regarded as an event or process that affects an individual – each individual possibly perceiving an event or experience differently. These perceptions are coloured by each person's own feelings about how they, as an individual, are affected by an experience and by their own standing in relation to the specific experience.

Using the idea of considering an experience or event from differing perspectives, after having elicited the girls' views, I then sought the standpoint of the individual girls' teachers. They in turn explicated their views as to how they saw the girls in terms of their schooling – ie.their interpretation of the girls as pupils. Developing the idea of using different perceptions of an experience still further I made use of the girls' mothers' views – these focused on how they saw their daughters' education unfolding and examined how they interpreted their own actual relationships with the individual schools their daughters attended. They also incorporated a consideration of the mothers' educational experiences and how these may have affected their views and attitudes where their daughters were concerned.

Using other people's accounts to build on the initial information provided by an individual to gain a fuller and more detailed reconstruction of that actual experience is a process used by Goodson(1992) when he reconstructs the life experiences of teachers. He starts with their individual life stories then expands on these using data from a variety of other sources ie.documentary evidence, historical data and other people's accounts.

It is by using information gained from a variety of sources – in the case of this research girls, their mothers and teachers – that a more complete picture emerges. This piecing

together of data gained from the various people who have direct connections with the girls' educational lives, including themselves, provides insights into how the girls actually experience their schooling and some of the pressures and problems they face. Goodson(1992) distinguishes between life stories and life histories – both of which are used in this research project – they are educational life stories and life histories ie.they are focusing on one specific aspect of the individuals' lives. He describes life stories as personal reconstructions of experiences. Much of the data gained from the mothers and girls in this research could be described as educational life stories – they are allowed to relate their stories and perceptions concerning their own education. These are then used as a basis for further development. Goodson(1992) indicates that life histories start as life stories and are then built on in order to become life histories. This is done by incorporating other data from alternative sources. In this way not only stories of lives are involved but the actual context of the lives is also investigated. This enables the exploration of underlying reasons why individuals feel as they do or react in certain ways in given circumstances. Both of these aspects are fundamental to this actual piece of research. The individuals are located in their social, political and cultural contexts which give them particular social roles which have implications for what they can and cannot do. Goodson(1995) emphasises the significance of contextualising lives.

By considering the perspectives and interpretations people place on their own experiences this form of research provides an insight into the lives of others and contributes to a greater understanding of social interaction. Plummer(1983) highlights the subjective nature of this research methodology and details its sources of bias as possibly emanating from aspects involving the informants, the researcher and the interaction. Despite pointing out the diversity of sources of bias in this method of research he also indicates that its great strength also actually lies in its very subjectivity. It has the ability to represent the informants' own definition of their reality or situation. This view is also supported by Cohen and Manion(1994).

The emphasis is placed on the individual and how he/she copes with aspects of society. Each person makes choices and possibly decides to alter course and may experience transitions within their life. When faced with a new role or fresh relations with different people a new self-conception may arise. It is important to consider the main opportunities or limitations an individual experiences – how and why they adapt their behaviour? What have they tried to change? What have they tried to maintain? Exploring the way in which people adapt or change aspects of their lives and behaviours in order to maintain an element of continuity within their existence is emphasised by Mandelbaum(1982) when discussing life history research as a process.

In this particular research a very important issue is that the study is, for the major part, written from the point of view of girls and women. They are allowed to put forward their perceptions and interpretations of events. Reinharz(1992) raises the importance of the significance of attempting to make women's and girls' experiences public and adding to an awareness of their lives – how as individuals and groups they create meaning. The issue of their private and personal world being brought into the public domain is discussed by Harrison and Stina Lyon(1993).

The idea of using educational life histories to reflect on classroom practice is explored by Norquay(1990) and Sikes and Troyna(1991). Here individuals' own school life experiences are investigated and connections between these and present educational practices are probed. In both these instances adults reflect on childhood memories of school days and make sense of these in terms of their own life experiences.

Ayers(1990) considers the educational life histories of a group of ten year old boys. He focuses on the fact that the informants do not just have a single story to tell but often produce contradictory accounts in an effort to make sense of their school lives. This is very much linked to the nature of subjective experience and, indeed, because lives are often contradictory. This is an issue that life history research itself acknowledges.



One of the most important aspects of life history work is that it allows others to identify with the subject and perhaps gain a feeling of what it means to experience that person's life. In a meaningful way it illuminates connections between an individual and society as a whole.

Goodson(1983 and 1995) views the actual research method as an interactive and co-operative process directly involving the researcher who is more than just a listener but an active investigator of the contexts of lives. It is important that there is a rapport and understanding between both the researcher and the individual correspondents.

### **The Research Sample.**

The size of sample used in this research did have certain constraints imposed upon it – not least being that the research was carried out by an individual. This obviously limited time availability and also personal availability. The methodology used to gain data, on the whole, involved in depth interviews with individuals which again was a time consuming process. Restrictions were also imposed by the participants themselves in that times for interviewing had to be fitted into their daily schedules – often where adults were concerned interviews had to take place outside the normal working day. These issues are raised by Bell(1987) when discussing preliminary factors that are relevant in research project design. Bearing in mind these factors I decided to limit the number of interviews I carried out to between fifteen and twenty mothers and daughters. To an extent the number of people participating was also dependent on the number of mothers giving informed consent and being willing to be interviewed. In the end sixteen mothers and daughters participated fully in this research project.

I felt that this was an adequate number to enable me to gain a wider understanding of the social processes and social actions involved at the focus of my research. The main aim of this research was not to use the data acquired from the sample to make generalisations to a wider group. Much of the data gained was of an individual nature – however that did not discount some commonalities which did emerge.

The initial aim was to achieve a balance in terms of the social backgrounds of the girls and their mothers – the emphasis being on acquiring roughly equivalent numbers from working-class and middle-class backgrounds and similarly comparable numbers of families from rural and suburban environments. A further issue was that it was desirable that the girls who were to be the focus of this research incorporated individuals from a range of academic abilities – the most able through to individuals receiving remedial help within their schools. The main emphasis was on achieving an overall balance in terms of the individuals who were participating in the research project – taking into account the whole sample, and the size limitations imposed on this sample by the detailed and lengthy nature of the interview process to be adopted, this was achieved. However, an area of concern did arise where the schools of the individual girls were involved. The three schools, Westfield Acre School, Whitemoor Junior School and High Wood School, provided girls from a range of backgrounds and abilities but the nature of the schools themselves perhaps introduced an element of bias into the research. Of the sixteen girls participating in the research eight of them attended High Wood School which was a very high attaining school, seven girls came from Whitemoor Junior School which could be classed as having a moderately good academic record and one girl came from Westfield Acre School which had a comparatively poor academic record when compared to the other two schools. This perceived imbalance was the direct result of part of the ‘negotiating access’ process at Westfield Acre School. The headteacher, Mr. Burns, emphasised that many of the pupils came from ‘difficult’ home-backgrounds and, in many instances, experienced learning difficulties. He therefore wished me to be ‘attached’ to a class that had an experienced class teacher – in order to minimise any possible disruptions to the pupils’ normal routine. This was a condition of my being allowed to carry out my research within Westfield Acre School. The class he proposed that I ‘attached’ myself to was that of Mrs. Smith, the most experienced class teacher in the particular age range I was considering. This class was somewhat unusual within the

school setup in that the ratio of boys to girls was very unbalanced – there being only five girls in the actual class. This obviously directly affected the size and nature of the ‘research sample’ available at Westfield Acre School. In the end, after all the phases of negotiating access including negotiating access to the individual mothers, only one mother and daughter from the school gave informed consent to participate fully in the research. However, whilst this does appear to present an anomaly in the research sample, when the sample is considered as a whole a balance is obtained in terms of the girls’ backgrounds and abilities and this was my over-riding concern.

The first factor involved in actual interviewee selection was that the child was still involved in the primary phase of her education. I was specifically interested in girls who were either in Year 5 or Year 6 of their primary schooling. This meant that they were nearing the end of their time at primary school and so were more readily able to consider a whole phase of their education. I felt that the older primary school girls would also have the ability and maturity to put over their opinions and point of view in an interview situation more coherently than younger pupils. Their language capabilities would be at a more sophisticated stage of development and they could give reasoned answers.

As has been previously stated, one of the over-riding criteria in selecting mothers and daughters to act as interviewees was that the individuals came from a range of social backgrounds and that the mothers had had a diversity of educational experiences. This was borne in mind when choosing which schools to approach in order to proceed with the research project. The schools selected were in very different environments – two were suburban schools whose catchment areas mainly included families living in rented council properties and the third school was situated in a comparatively affluent rural setting with the majority of families living in privately owned housing.

By the end of the rather complex stage of gaining informed consent from the various individuals the final sample contained eight mothers and daughters from the suburban schools and eight mothers and daughters from the rural school. These included families

from diverse social backgrounds and mothers whose educational experiences included those who had left school at the first opportunity and individuals who had undergone a university education. All of the mothers who responded positively to participating in the research were white. The two suburban schools both had a small proportion of pupils from different ethnic backgrounds but none of these mothers indicated a willingness to be included in the research project. This, unfortunately, I acknowledge as a limitation in the sample of mothers and daughters I interviewed. However I did not feel that I was in a position, or indeed that it was ethical, to coerce people to participate. Powney and Watts(1987) indicate that the best interviewees are those willing to inform and are sensitive to areas of concern.

### **Gaining Access.**

With this particular piece of research the access negotiations proved to be rather complex and fraught with difficulties. Initially access had been negotiated and gained at the school where I was working as the deputy headteacher. Nearly a year into my research a new headteacher took up his post and decided that he did not wish me to continue with my research and withdrew his consent. He instructed the governing body to write to me formally stating that they too withdrew their consent. Several reasons were given for this including the research was of no benefit to the school or education in general, it was not appropriate for the deputy headteacher to question mothers about the education their daughters were receiving at the school and it was unfair to interview individual pupils in their lunchbreaks as they needed their playtime. Obviously with these negative views it was possible for the head to completely block my research. This problem was faced by Measor and Woods(1991) who simply point out that when this happens there is not a great deal a researcher can do.

Fortunately shortly after this I retired from teaching and decided to negotiate access in the three schools mentioned in the description of the sample to be used for the purposes of this research. In many ways this initial difficulty gave me more freedom to choose

mothers and daughters from a wider range of backgrounds and environments than would have originally been possible. Also as I was no longer restricted to interviewing pupils in the lunchbreak I had more flexibility of time. This was particularly significant when I came to interview the mothers of the girls – I was able to meet them during the day if they wished and at a venue of their choice. Obviously this had not been possible when I was teaching full-time.

The first stage in gaining access involved contacting the headteachers of individual schools. One of the headteachers was a personal friend and the other two had been approached by acquaintances who asked them if they would mind me contacting them with a view to carrying out research in their respective schools. I telephoned and arranged a face to face meeting with each of the headteachers. Prior to these meetings I sent a detailed outline of my research project with the aim being to give a greater understanding of what I was hoping to accomplish. This included details of the actual research process and how I wished to go about gaining my data. The headteacher would then already have a basis for discussion at our meeting. I felt that it was important that I was as honest and open as possible in my requests and explanations. This view is supported by Hornsby-Smith(1993) who indicates that the more open a researcher is the easier it is to gain social access.

The headteachers, after raising any points of concern, arranged to present my research proposals to the individual school governing bodies and the members of staff in their schools. We decided that it was more constructive to ask the class teachers in the appropriate years(Years 5 and 6) if there were any individuals who would be willing to have me 'attached' to their class. Powney and Watts(1987) indicate that the best correspondents and interviewees are those willing to inform and are sensitive to the area of concern. I did not want teachers to feel that they were being coerced into participating. The three headteachers were willing to act as 'gatekeepers' for me to gain further access

into their schools. They also included information in their school newsletters concerning my presence in the school so that parents were aware of what was taking place.

Fortunately a member of staff in each school volunteered to assist me in my research. The arrangements negotiated allowed for me to be based with a designated class in each school for a full half term. In each case for the first two weeks of my 'attachment' I generally familiarised myself with the class and school organisation. I became acquainted with the pupils and allowed the class teachers to make constructive use of my presence – hearing children read, assisting small groups or individuals with a variety of tasks, dealing with individual difficulties pupils were experiencing. One of the important factors was that the girls did not see me as a teacher ie.in an authoritative role. With this in mind I attempted to have a relaxed approach towards the pupils and whenever possible tried to casually chat with them about what they were doing or what they were interested in outside school. The general aim was that they would become accustomed to my presence and more readily engage in conversation with me – on an informal basis.

Alongside the familiarisation process I worked with each headteacher to design an appropriate letter to go out to the girls' parents requesting permission to carry out tape-recorded interviews with their daughters. The letter briefly outlined who I was and the purpose of the interviews. It also explained how the information gained was to be used and its possible audience. Throughout it was emphasised that the data given was confidential and that in my final written account the schools and individuals would be subject to anonymity ie.given pseudonyms. If any parent wished to discuss aspects of the research with me or raise any concerns they could indicate on the reply slip attached to the letter. Robson(1993) discusses the ethics of obtaining informed consent and acquainting respondents with how their data is to be used and the audience for which it is intended. Bell(1987) also raises the significance of informing participants about what is going to happen to any information they divulge.

The response to my request for girls to participate in my research was overwhelming. Every single parent of a girl in each of the three classes that I was based in gave a positive response. Although I had received parental permission I felt that the girls themselves should give their permission and feel comfortable with what they were being asked to do. I did not want them feeling pressurised into participating. With this in mind I spoke to each group of girls and attempted to very simply explain what the research was about and what was required of them. The significance of offering children taking part in the research project explanations is highlighted by Cohen and Manion(1994). Above all else I tried to allay any fears that they may have had concerning the use of the interview material. They also had the opportunity to ask questions and express any concerns.

The final stage was to gain access to interview the girls' mothers. This was done via a letter jointly composed with the headteacher of each of the schools. The letter thanked the mothers for allowing their daughters to be interviewed and requested them to act as volunteers to be spoken to themselves. The letter outlined the purpose of the interview and again the confidentiality and anonymity of the individual was emphasised and incorporated was a short explanation as to how the information I gained was to be used. An attached slip allowed mothers who responded positively to my request to indicate how they wished me to make contact with them. All of the individuals requested that I telephoned them and arranged a time and place when I could interview them. Some wished me to go to their homes and others wished to be interviewed at the school.

Where this particular research was concerned the process of gaining access was rather complex as it involved a variety of groups of people – teachers, girls, girls' mothers. I did not want any of the individuals to feel under pressure to participate. I wanted their willing co-operation.

### **The Interviews.**

The main sources of data in this research were semi-structured interviews carried out with girls, their mothers and their teachers. This method had the advantage of being

adaptable in that I was able to follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings. More importantly it enabled interviewees to provide information freely which was particularly pertinent when more open responses were required. Powney and Watts(1987) liken this form of interviewing to 'purposeful conversations'. Where the girls were concerned I carried out two separate interviews. I felt that one interview would be too long for them to maintain their concentration and remain interested in the conversation. With the mothers I carried out one interview and with the class teacher I carried out several interviews – until I had gained the appropriate data about each of the girls who were involved in my research.

The interviews were structured in terms of the research problem. If they had been totally unstructured it could have led to the interviewees becoming anxious and uncertain of the purpose of the interview. Bearing this in mind before the interviews took place I constructed a framework which I felt could be an aid when I came to analyse the data at a later date. It was flexible and allowed the interviews to proceed like controlled conversations permitting free interaction between myself and the interviewee. Where the girls were concerned a part of each interview was based around the idea of scaled responses. In the first case I elicited their feelings pertaining to curriculum subject preferences. For each of the subject areas they had to indicate how much they enjoyed it – selecting one of the categories: likes very much, likes, neutral, dislikes, does not like at all. Wherever possible I elicited reasons for their choice of category. In a similar way part of the second interview with the girls was used to ascertain how the girls assessed their own abilities in given curriculum and subject areas. Here they had to indicate one of the following categories for how they rated their own academic performance: very good, good, average, poor, extremely poor. Yet again I attempted to obtain reasons for their responses.

I also used this same scaled response for part of the interviews with the individual class teachers when they assessed each girl's abilities. This enabled me to compare both the



girls' responses and the teachers' responses in my final analysis. Tuckman(1972) considers the value of incorporating scaled responses within the overall framework of an interview.

Even though parts of the interviews were comparatively structured it was vital that I was able to explore my subjects' view of reality and had the opportunity to clarify and discuss issues. Fielding(1993) emphasises the importance of this type of interviewing for trying to get at other people's feelings and trying to find out what actually happens rather than just the frequency of a specific event. With this in mind it was important that the questioning was as open-ended as possible as this would elicit spontaneous information and would encourage informants to reveal underlying attitudes, beliefs and values. This view is supported by Reinharz(1992) who emphasises the importance of interviewees being able to put forward their ideas in their own words. She also points out the significance of this method of research in enabling individual views to be expressed which emphasise the individuality of the respondents.

An issue that was particularly pertinent in the case of this research was that I was dealing with both adults and children as research subjects. This method of data collection was ideally suited to this in that it could be geared to the individuals being interviewed and their differing levels of understanding.

The venue for the interviews with the girls and their class teachers was obviously the respective schools. Within each of the schools I was allocated a quiet, comfortable area where I could carry out the interviews without interruption or disturbance. There was also no danger of the conversation being overheard by anyone else. Where the mothers were concerned a venue was arranged during our initial telephone conversations. Some of the mothers preferred to be interviewed at their daughter's school whereas others wished to be interviewed in their own homes. Obviously they selected somewhere in which they would feel comfortable and at ease being interviewed. In the case of some of the mothers they felt more relaxed being seen in their own homes and maybe did not see me in a

position of authority or as a person directly connected with their daughters' schools. It perhaps helped to distance the activity from the more formal setting of the school and enabled them to feel freer to talk without restrictions. In some instances the setting for the interviews generated quantities of secondary data that proved useful in providing contextual background evidence. Porter(1994) raises this issue – the significance of the venue for the interview.

Where three of the mothers were concerned they requested that someone else was present when they were interviewed. In each of these instances the mothers were from suburban areas and had not gained any academic qualifications themselves – they had left school at the first possible opportunity. One of them requested that her husband was present, another her mother and the third wished for her eldest daughter to sit in on the interview. I willingly acceded to their wishes and did not find the extra person present at the interview intrusive – in fact the opposite. On a number of occasions they actually encouraged the individual mother to be more forthcoming in the information she volunteered. In one or two instances the companion participated in the interview and gave relevant data for the research project.

Powney and Watts(1987) and Delamont(1992) convey the importance of the first impressions the interviewer creates. They indicate how these could affect the behaviour of the respondents. The image conveyed by dress etc. could indicate a great deal about the interviewer ie.social class, status, values. This could well determine whether or not the interviewees can identify with the interviewer. Bearing this in mind I preferred to appear reasonably relaxed and casual – indicating that the interview situation was not steeped in formality. I particularly did not want any of the respondents to view me as a person in authority.

I was very much aware that my manner could affect the interviewees' responses and the outcomes of the interviews. It was important to appear relaxed and unselfconscious – above all else interested in what the interviewees were saying but at the same time not

intrusive. Interviewing is of a personal nature and therefore I feel that it is important that the interviewer empathises with the interviewee and shows understanding and sympathy for the informant's point of view. Burgess(1982) indicates that a researcher should have the ability to share the culture of the individuals they are interviewing.

In many ways effective interviewing depends on how the social situation is defined. It is important that there is a good degree of trust particularly because of the confidential nature of some of the information given and the research subjects must trust the interviewer not to betray confidences. With this in mind I attempted to lay the grounds for trust prior to the interview by the reasons I gave for the interview and the reassurances I gave concerning confidentiality and anonymity. The quality of the interview hinged on a mutual trust and a good rapport. The aim was that it was a shared experience. As the interviewer I tried not to lose sight of the fact that the interviewees may well have adopted what they saw as an appropriate role and tried to please and give the information that they felt was required. They in fact decided what 'truth' was made available to me as the interviewer. I tried to ease this situation in the initial stages of the interview by redefining the context of the inquiry which hopefully helped to eliminate some irrelevant information.

From the perspective of the interviewees they may well have felt that they ought to give a certain impression in order to maintain their self-esteem. This may have involved deciding what they admitted to and what they did not admit to – in other words they produced what was seen by them as socially acceptable responses which did not express their actual view. These answers represented the 'group' to which they perceived they belonged. Therefore as the interviewer I needed to take into account these cultural and ideological factors when structuring my questions.

In a similar vein Fielding(1993) emphasises the need to view the interview from the respondent's perspective. They may be worried about saying something foolish or may

only give what they perceive as sensible reasons. Similarly emotional reasons may be withheld and interviewees may find difficulty in describing feelings.

These issues were particularly pertinent when I was interviewing children. It was likely that a child may have felt intimidated when interviewed by an adult – they may well have behaved in what they perceived as the expected manner when in the presence of an adult due to the inherent authority relationship. In my own case it was important that I avoided the ‘teacher role’. From this point of view the language I used and the manner in which I ‘chatted’ to the girls was very important. Throughout the interview I needed to explain carefully and check that I understood what the research subjects were telling me. This was important as I, as an adult, could well have a different logic and priorities.

Young children in particular tend to be more literal and pay attention to unexpected details. Walford(1991) comments on the disparity between an adult and a child’s understanding of a given situation and the relevance this has in the interpretation of information. In terms of explaining the ethical issues such as confidentiality it is much easier to explain to an adult. Children may well be cautious in case information is ‘used against them’ or passed on to another adult in a position of ‘authority’ eg.their teacher. For this reason they may well be reluctant to expose any emotion or make evaluative comments about their schools. In these instances I found that gentle probing was required as well as reassurance and encouragement.

Regarding the actual interviews and their content I tried to make them as much like a normal conversation as possible. I did not want them to appear to be confrontational situations. I also tried to discreetly place the cassette recorder being used to tape the conversations so that it was not the focus of attention or acting as a distraction. When everything was ready for the interview I checked whether or not there was anything else the interviewee wanted to know. The initial aim in the interview was to gain a rapport with the respondent and show interest in what they were saying. This was assisted by maintaining eye contact and offering reassurances from time to time. Whyte(1982)

suggests leading the interviewees gently into the interview by starting them talking about descriptive matters rather than evaluative ones. Respondents should not be pushed to reveal inner feelings straight away. If an area is not fully covered it can always be re-introduced at a later stage in the interview.

Where these particular interviews were concerned I commenced by trying to elicit purely descriptive facts about the specific schools the girls attended. I then moved into other areas that were relevant to this research. I was able to move backwards and forwards among a variety of discussion topics. Some of the questions asked were closed and others open-ended – the latter were to elicit fuller responses. However, sometimes the more open-ended questions resulted in rather vague answers. When this occurred some prompting was called for – care being taken not to direct the respondent. Measor and Woods(1991) indicate the need to probe a respondent's meanings in order to know how they are constructed. To assist this the interviewee may be asked to give examples. This also helped if the discussion revolved around values and beliefs.

As well as listening attentively and accurately it was important that I picked up any non-verbal cues. These often communicate feelings and are frequently missed or dismissed. I stated earlier that I wished to record all of my interviews. Obviously this was only done if the participants were agreeable to it. This enabled me to have a full record of any conversations. From experience I have found that a discreetly placed recorder provides little distraction and the interviewees soon become accustomed to it and ignore it.

Note taking can cause the interviewer to miss important leads and there is also the problem of recall if the notes are written up after the interview. If notes are taken whilst the interview is taking place it appears to add formality to the occasion and may inhibit the informant. Further to this full note taking is difficult at the speed of normal conversation. This process would intrude on the interviewer's concentration and could intrude on the flow of the interviewee's responses. Another advantage of recording the interviews is that it aids in the process of analysis if a verbatim transcription is used.

Whilst acknowledging that this process is laborious and time-consuming it may well reveal lines of analysis and help in the planning of subsequent interviews.

### **Analysis of Data.**

The first stage in the analysis was the transcription of the interview tapes. Although this was time-consuming it enabled me to become familiar with the data obtained. Any passages that appeared significant were marked on the transcripts. This, of course, was a rather subjective process and my major problem was to decide what to omit and what to include. My initial areas for discussion in the interviews were used as a loose framework. More detailed categories emerged out of the interview material itself. These categories and emergent themes form the basis for the analysis proper which follows.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **The Schools, the Girls and their Mothers.**

#### **Introduction.**

This chapter includes a short description of the three schools that are at the centre of this research. Also included is a brief outline of the family background of each of the girls who participated. Alongside this are details of the educational achievements of the girls' mothers.

#### **Westfield Acre School.**

Westfield Acre School is situated at the edge of a council housing estate on the eastern outskirts of a large Midlands conurbation. The housing was built in the early 1970's to house overspill population from the inner-city and also to rehouse people moving from areas of housing designated for slum clearance. The housing consists of high-rise blocks of flats, maisonettes and houses. There is very little in the way of open spaces or grassed areas where the children can play. The overall impression is of high density housing. There is a recreation ground which consists of several football pitches but no play equipment for younger children. Within the immediate vicinity there appear to be few amenities except for a public house. There are no shops within the 'housing estate' itself but there are regular bus services to neighbouring shopping areas. The vast majority of pupils at Westfield Acre School live within the council estate surrounding the school.

The school building itself, which was built in the 1970's, is single storey, well-maintained and has comparatively recently been painted. Entrance to the school is gained via security intercom and the release of an electronic lock. All of the external doors have electronic locks which members of staff can operate by 'punching in' a number code. The school is very security conscious – further emphasised by having only certain areas outside designated for meeting and collecting children. There have been problems with

vandalism concerning the school grounds – particularly the football posts which now have to be brought in to the school building at the end of each day.

Virtually all of the classrooms are only walled on three sides with the fourth side opening onto either a corridor or central work area. These work areas contain extra tables and sinks more appropriate for art and craft and practical work. A number of class teachers have used cupboards, shelving units and larger pieces of classroom furniture to partially close off the fourth open side of their rooms – presumably to afford the class more privacy and limit distractions which come in the form of other classes moving along the corridor and groups of children participating in practical freer work activities in the adjoining work areas. On occasions noise intrusion is particularly noticeable within the classrooms.

However, the overall impression of the school is that it is clean and well-maintained. There are seventeen full-time teaching staff, including the headteacher, and two part-time staff. There are also four special support assistants – three full-time and one part-time. Two full-time assistants are attached to the Educational Behavioural Difficulties Unit (E.B.D.U.) and one full-time and one part-time worker work in the Hearing Impaired Unit (H.I.U.).

The staff are generally in the age range of thirties to forties with just a few in their twenties. There are three male teachers on the staff – namely the headteacher, the head of I.T. and science and the head of the Educational and Behavioural Difficulties Unit who also has responsibility for audio-visual resources. The part-time teachers and the special support assistants are all women.

The headteacher, Mr.Burns, is in his forties. He has been head of the school for several years and has a non-teaching role. Generally speaking he appears to adopt a low-key role in the school and has a ‘softly softly’ approach definitely not confrontational in style. Both he and his teaching staff described his style in this manner. He has a very calm, quiet manner. He emphasises that many of the pupils come from ‘difficult’ or ‘non-



supportive' backgrounds and places importance on the school's relationship with parents. He describes many of the parents as tending to be 'volatile' and is obviously concerned in case this delicate balance is upset. A major part of his role revolves around maintaining an even relationship with the parents.

The school is a junior and infants school with Mr. Burns being the overall head but there is a member of staff designated to be head of infants and early years education. The roles of members of staff are very much geared to dealing with special needs and compensatory education. The overall aim is to try and integrate the special needs pupils as much as possible into mainstream schooling. This means that a support assistant works with an individual in ordinary class lessons. The hearing impaired pupils may be accompanied to lessons by an assistant who 'signs' for them. Other pupils may be withdrawn from lessons for individual help.

The importance of the school as a support agency and a link with home is further emphasised by a member of staff being designated as a home/school liaison co-ordinator. Curriculum subject areas are also allocated a subject co-ordinator but the number of staff allocated to deal with special needs areas indicates where the school's priorities lie. This is reinforced by individual members of staff making frequent references to various pupils and incidents that indicate that something is 'wrong' or 'happening' at home. They obviously see their roles as being compensatory and supportive towards the pupils – the emphasis being on many individuals having non-supportive or 'problem' backgrounds.

There are three hundred and ninety two pupils on the school roll and the majority of these live on the housing estate surrounding the school. Very few of the children come from ethnic minority groups. In the whole school there are perhaps about eighteen pupils from an African- Caribbean or Asian background.

The number of pupils in each year group varies so that sometimes two year groups are combined and the classes are vertically grouped. At present there are two reception classes and then Year 1 and Year 2 are combined to form three classes. Year 3 pupils are

divided into two classes and Year 4 and Year 5 are combined to form three classes. Year 6 is made up of two classes.

Very shortly after entering the school the pupils are placed in ability groups for mathematics and English. In Years 1 and 2 they are not totally 'set' for mathematics, just number work – with the remaining aspects of the subject being covered in 'topics' in class. Much emphasis is placed on literacy and numeracy and by Year 6 the whole of every morning is taken up with teaching various facets of English and mathematics. Children experiencing learning difficulties are either withdrawn from class or receive support during lessons. Mrs. Smith, the teacher whose class I was using for the purposes of my research, emphasised that far more children warranted additional help but only the 'worst' cases actually received it. There are two or three 'able' children in a class but the majority are mid-range to less able in ability. This inevitably appeared to affect the individual teacher's approach – the stress being on compensatory education and basic numeracy and literacy. The lessons appeared to be formal in structure.

Many of the pupils, as well as experiencing academic difficulties, also experience behavioural difficulties and problems in their home and family background. This point is frequently emphasised by individual members of staff. A few individuals in the school experience quite severe behavioural problems and a notable amount of 'teacher time' is spent dealing with these pupils. Great pains are taken to ensure that they are settled in order to minimise disruption. Emphasis is placed on 'maintaining control and order' so that effective teaching can take place.

Mrs. Smith's class could be considered to be quite unusual in that there were only five girls in the class. This inevitably affected the social make up and relations within the class and perhaps even affected the teachers' approach when teaching the class group.

In the year this research took place 30% of Year 6 pupils attained Level 4 or above in the English S.A.T.'s (Standard Assessment Tasks), 34% attained Level 4 or above in mathematics and 50% attained Level 4 or above in science.

### **Girl and Mother from Westfield Acre School.**

Suzie is a Year 6 pupil who lives with her mother and siblings in rented accommodation. At present the family are temporarily living with Suzie's grandparents because of experiencing various family problems and disruption. Her mother is a lone parent and does not work outside the family home. She has just had another baby. Suzie's mother left school without gaining any academic qualifications and only worked for a few weeks as she was pregnant. Throughout her school career she attended state schools. Suzie is her first child and she had her when she was sixteen.

### **Whitemoor Junior School.**

The school is situated in a suburban area on the southern fringes of a large Midlands conurbation. The school was built in the 1950's and is mainly surrounded by council developments that were erected at the same time as the school. The remainder of the neighbouring housing consists of medium to small developments built in succeeding decades – some being owner-occupier housing. Within the immediate vicinity there are several shops – newsagents and shops selling a variety of groceries and household products. There are also regular bus services to more major shopping areas.

The catchment area of the school is quite extensive but the majority of the pupils come from the neighbouring council properties. A few children live outside the catchment area but attend the school through parental choice.

The overall impression of the school site is that great care is taken to make the surroundings attractive. However, for the size of the school, the field and playground are rather small and restricted.

Despite both the Junior and Infants schools being on the same site they are run as two separate institutions. Even though the Infants School is actually joined to the Junior School it has its own separate, fenced off playground area and its own main entrance.

The Junior School main building was built in the 1950's and is single storey and extremely well-maintained and well-decorated. A very noticeable feature, on approaching

the main entrance, is a plaque presented to the school by the Education Authority for educational achievement. Entrance to the school is gained via security intercom and the release of an electronic lock. The main entrance is the only one with this type of lock and security.

All of the classrooms in the main school building open off corridors. They are self-contained, each with its own sink and stock cupboard. Outside the door each classroom has its own cloakroom area. It is not possible to see into individual classrooms without actually entering the room so each class teacher has a degree of seclusion from other classes.

The overall impression of the school is that it is extremely well-maintained and great efforts are made to make it a colourful and attractive environment for the pupils and anyone entering the school.

There are fourteen full-time teaching staff, including the headteacher, and two part-time teaching staff. The staff are mainly in the thirties to forties age range with just a few teachers in their twenties and a few over fifty years of age.

The headteacher, Mr. Milton, is in his late forties and has been head of the school for eleven years. He has a non-teaching role but has a high profile within the school. His presence is a normal feature in the corridors and reception area particularly at the beginning and end of the school day. Children frequently approach him and engage him in conversation – as do parents. During the school day it is quite normal for groups of visitors or individuals to be shown around the school. Mr. Milton has an obvious pride in the school and its achievements. He has a direct approach tempered with much humour. This particularly shows in his relationship with his teaching staff. At breaks and lunchtimes he joins the staff in the staffroom and socialises with them as well as talking about issues that have arisen within the school. He emphasises the importance of having positive relationships with both his staff and the parents of pupils and points out that the parents trust the school. Stress is also placed on the achievements of the pupils – Mr.

Milton keeps samples of work in his office from pupils when they enter the school and then samples after they have been in the school a period of time. The viewer is then able to see the noticeable improvement.

There are four male teachers on the staff – namely the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, the head of science and the R.E. co-ordinator. The part-time teachers are both women.

Each member of staff is allocated a curriculum area to organise and develop. The emphasis is on presenting the pupils with a balanced curriculum and ensuring work of a high standard is produced. The vast majority of pupils would fall in the ‘average’ to above categories concerning ability so the staff are able to place emphasis on academic achievement. This is illustrated in that the Year 5 pupils sit ‘mock’ S.A.T.’s when the Year 6 pupils are sitting the ‘official’ version. This is an effort to prepare them so that they perform at their best when their turn comes to be assessed in the following year.

There are provisions made for ‘special needs’ pupils and these are withdrawn for assistance with language work or assisted within the class. Members of staff do discuss individual pupils with behavioural, or other problems, but these are in the minority. Generally the issues concerned revolve around the curriculum and the teachers are able to teach without a ‘heavy emphasis on ‘policing’, ‘controlling’ or providing compensatory education.

There are three hundred and thirty five pupils on the school roll. There are very few children from ethnic minority groups. In the whole school there are only perhaps half a dozen pupils from an African- Caribbean or Asian background. In the school there are four year groups (Years 3-6) – each year group being made up of three classes.

Shortly after entering the school the pupils are placed in ability sets for mathematics and English. The ‘set’ lessons only take place twice a week with the remaining aspects of mathematics and English being taught and covered in class lessons. The areas to be

covered in sets or classes are determined in year planning meetings where the work is planned across the year group.

Children experiencing 'learning difficulties' are withdrawn to work in small groups, or individually, to improve their reading and language work. Sometimes an individual may receive individual support within a class lesson. A small proportion of pupils fall into the 'special needs' category. Within a class there are several 'able' children with the majority being in the mid-range in terms of academic ability. In terms of teaching the school does not have a severe remedial/slow learner problem.

There are individual children who experience some behavioural difficulties and problems in their home and family background but the number of these is quite low. The class teacher, Mrs. Wheeler, whose class I was using for my research, said that very few of the families come from 'professional' family backgrounds but the families are supportive of their children and the school.

In the year this research took place 48% of Year 6 pupils attained Level 4 or above in the English S.A.T.'s (Standard Assessment Tasks), 45% attained Level 4 or above in mathematics and 55% gained Level 4 or above in science.

#### **Girls and Mothers from Whitemoor Junior School.**

Judy is a Year 5 pupil who lives in a rented house with her mother and brother. Her mother is a lone parent who works in a shop. She left school without gaining any academic qualifications and attended a comprehensive school. Her first place of work was in a supermarket and then she worked in a factory.

Louisa is a Year 5 pupil who lives in an owner-occupied house with her mother, father and younger sister. Her father is a professional international athletics coach and her mother is training to be a display artist at a well-known chain store. Her mother left school with four O-levels and a number of C.S.E.'s after having attended a comprehensive school. She then followed an arts' foundation course at a Further Education College. After completing this she worked as a photographic assistant. She

then spent periods of time working as an aerobics teacher and for a short time designed and made running tights for athletes.

Mandy is a Year 5 pupil who lives in a rented flat with her mother, father and older sister. Her father is long-term unemployed and helps to care for her mother who does not work outside the home as she experiences severe problems with a back injury. Mandy's mother left school without gaining any academic qualifications after having attended a comprehensive school. She worked in shops but was mainly employed doing bar work in public houses.

Toni is a Year 5 pupil who lives in owner-occupier property with her mother, father and brother. Her father is a manager at a car manufacturer and her mother runs a nursery group. Toni's mother left school having gained five O-levels and four C.S.E.'s. She started A-level courses but left before completing them. She attended a comprehensive school. She worked in a photographic laboratory and then as a company representative.

Tracy is a Year 5 pupil who lives in a rented house with her mother and older brother. Her mother is a lone parent who works in administration at the local housing department. Tracy's mother left her comprehensive school with some C.S.E.'s and then did a B.Tec. course in public administration. First of all she worked as a clerk and then a secretary. She then spent a period of time working as an assistant in a local library.

Val is a Year 5 pupil who lives with her mother, father, older sister and older brother in a rented house. Her father is long-term unemployed and her mother does not work outside the home. Val's mother left school without gaining any academic qualifications and worked in a shop. She had attended a comprehensive school.

Vicky is a Year 5 pupil who lives in a rented house with her mother, father and younger siblings. Her father works in a video-rental shop and her mother is not working at the present time as she is pregnant. Vicky's mother left school with three O-levels and five C.S.E.'s. She started at the sixth form college but then left without completing her

courses. She mainly worked in shops, including a fish and chip shop, but was unemployed for extended periods of time.

### **High Wood School.**

The school is situated in a village in a rural area. It is a Church of England Aided school and was built in the 1890's. Virtually all of the housing in the immediate vicinity is privately owned – ranging from modern houses and bungalows to houses and cottages that are two or three hundred years old. All of the housing is well-maintained and the area gives the impression of affluence. There is a village shop and a public house but little in the way of public transport. Residents are much dependent on their own cars – many of the children travel to school in this manner.

The overall impression is of a quiet, affluent rural area with no evidence of vandalism. The catchment area of the school is quite extensive – including the village itself and outlying areas. A notable proportion of the pupils travel quite some distance to the school and, in fact, reside in other schools' catchment areas. In these instances they attend the school through parental choice.

The main school building is well-maintained but does present some problems because of its age and style. The high positioning of the windows causes difficulties in letting in natural light to some of the classrooms. The classrooms, in most cases, have had to be modified to cope with the demands of modern schooling ie. sinks have had to be fitted, old partition walls removed and display boards have had to be incorporated. Two new extensions have been built to house the nursery and infants class and to provide an extra classroom for the oldest children in the school.

Generally the school site is completely free of litter and immaculately maintained with well-kept gardens and lawns. The school has a comparatively large playground area and field, considering its size. Next to the playground is a small 'adventure playground' including a log cabin. An area is set aside as a wildlife garden and there is also a greenhouse where plants are grown for the school gardens by the pupils.



Entrance to the school is gained by the release of an electronic security lock. Members of staff can gain access by 'punching in' a coded number. The main entrance is the only one with this type of lock and security.

All of the classrooms are self-contained and have their own cloakroom area either just outside the room or at the back of the classroom itself. It is not possible to see into individual classrooms without actually entering the room so each class teacher has a degree of seclusion from the other classes.

There are six full-time teaching staff, including the headteacher, and two part-time teaching staff. The staff are mainly in the mid-thirties to fifties age range – most of them having been at the school for more than five years.

The headteacher, Mr. Jones, is in his early fifties and has been head of the school for well over ten years. He is a teaching head and shares a class with one of the part-time teachers, Mrs. Green. Mr. Jones teaches the class for three days a week and Mrs. Green takes it for the other two days. During this time Mr. Jones carries out the administrative duties as his role of headteacher demands. The class that these two teachers are responsible for includes all of the Year 6 and some of the Year 5 children. Any parents wishing to talk to Mr. Jones have to make an appointment – mainly due to his teaching commitment within the school.

Except for Mr. Jones, all of the members of staff are women. Each teacher is allocated more than one curriculum area to organise and develop. This does place additional pressures on the individual teachers and they readily acknowledge this. The emphasis is on maintaining high academic standards. The vast majority of the children would fall into the 'average' to above categories concerning ability – with a very notable proportion being 'high achievers'.

There are provisions made for 'special needs' pupils but there are very few of these in the school. These are mainly assisted by the part-time teachers who withdraw them from normal class lessons and give them extra assistance with reading and language work. In a

similar vein virtually no pupils are deemed to suffer from behavioural problems. Generally the emphasis is on academic achievement and issues tend to revolve around curricular matters rather than disciplinary concerns.

There are one hundred and forty eight pupils on the school roll. There are no children from ethnic minority groups. The pupils are divided into five classes and progress through the school is usually determined by age. Each class contains children from two year groups – the class I was based with included Year 5 and Year 6 pupils. All of the classes are unstreamed and the pupils are of mixed ability. For the majority of mathematics lessons and some formal English work the children are ability grouped within their own class for lessons.

In the school there is a great emphasis on clubs and extra-curricular activities – these taking place after school and during the lunch hour. Virtually every child in the school belongs to at least one of these clubs or groups. All the children have the opportunity to learn to play a musical instrument and some pupils actually play up to three different instruments. Some of these lessons take place during the school day and children go out of their normal class activities for their music lessons. There is a flourishing school choir and orchestra..

The majority of the children in the school come from ‘professional’ family backgrounds and are expected, by both their parents and their teachers, to succeed academically.

In the year this research took place 89% of Year 6 pupils attained Level 4 or above in the English S.A.T.’s (Standard Assessment Tasks), 67% attained Level 4 or above in mathematics and 89% attained Level 4 or above in science.

#### **Girls and Mothers from High Wood School.**

Anna is a Year 5 pupil who lives in an owner-occupier property with her father, mother and younger sister. Her father is a farmer and her mother is a teacher at a comprehensive school. On leaving school her mother gained eight O-levels and three A-levels. She had

attended a girls' grammar school. She then went on to college to train as a teacher and obtained a B.Ed. degree.

Kathy is a Year 5 pupil who lives in an owner-occupier property with her father, mother and older brother. Her father is a veterinary surgeon and her mother works from home administering his business and carrying out his secretarial work. Kathy's mother left school with eight O-levels and three A-levels. She had attended a girls' private school. She went on to attend university but left after one year and then pursued a two year bilingual secretarial course at college.

Lorna is a Year 5 pupil who lives in an owner-occupier property with her father, mother, older brother and two younger siblings. Her father is a landowner and farmer and her mother has just embarked on a course in order to become a teacher. Lorna's mother gained ten O-levels but failed the A-levels she sat at school. Initially she attended a girls' private school but pursued her A-levels at a state comprehensive school. She then completed a cookery course and did work connected with this. After a couple of years she did a typing course.

Sally is a Year 5 pupil who lives in an owner-occupier property with her father, mother, younger sister and older sister. Her father runs his own business and her mother is involved in secretarial work for her husband's small company. Sally's mother left school with four O-levels and some C.S.E.'s. She attended a secondary modern school. She then completed a two year secretarial course and took three more O-levels. She worked as a trainee medical secretary.

Ellie is a Year 6 pupil who lives in an owner-occupier property with her mother and younger brother. Her parents are divorced but the two children have weekly contact with their father who works as a stone mason. Ellie's mother is a nurse who left school with five O-levels and then followed a pre-nursing course before completing her training as a nurse. She had attended a comprehensive school.

Jane is a Year 6 pupil who lives in an owner-occupier property with her father, mother and younger brother. Her father is a car mechanic and her mother is a primary school teacher. Jane's mother left school after gaining nine O-levels and three A-levels. She attended a girls' grammar school. She then attended university and took a degree in German before gaining her P.G.C.E. at polytechnic.

Linda is a Year 6 pupil who lives in owner-occupier property with her father, mother, older sister and mentally handicapped older brother. Her father is the managing director of his own company and her mother is a nurse. Linda's mother left school having gained seven O-levels and one A-level. She attended a girls' grammar school. She then trained as a nurse and sat and passed a further two A-levels.

Rachel is a Year 6 pupil who lives in rented accommodation with her father, mother, older sister and younger sister. Her father is temporarily working in a factory and her mother does not work outside the home. Her mother left school without gaining any academic qualifications but then pursued a secretarial course and worked as a secretary. She attended a girls' comprehensive school in Australia.

A summary of the girls' mothers' educational backgrounds is contained on charts in the appendix.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## Girls' Perceptions Of The Primary Curriculum.

### Introduction.

This is an analysis of the girls' views and opinions of the curriculum they are taught at their primary schools. I have attempted to highlight any frequently expressed ideas or themes that emerged from the data. Wherever possible I have looked at underlying reasons for them or attempted explanations for their presence. These views and opinions are significant in that they are indicative of where the girls' interests and priorities lie. The priority given to different curriculum areas and, indeed, the girls' own personal feelings concerning their enjoyment, or otherwise, of a specific school subject could play a significant role in determining future decisions they make which could ultimately have an effect on academic outcomes and their subsequent careers. It is important to explore any biases or prejudices the girls may have concerning the subjects they are taught because these may possibly lead to the girls inadvertently limiting their own future activities and also narrowing the career options that may be available to them.

Whilst accepting that the boundaries and definitions of certain curriculum subjects, particularly the humanities subjects, may not be 'clear cut' due to the partially integrated nature of the primary curriculum it was possible to discuss these subject areas with the particular girls who participated in this research. In the three schools that the girls attended subject areas seemed to be fairly clearly delineated in that both the teachers and the pupils clearly differentiated between the various branches of the 'humanities'. Topics were referred to as eg.history or geography topics and the pupils had specific folders in which to place their work. The girls themselves indicated that they saw these curriculum areas as discrete subjects – perhaps based on the rather simplistic criterion of being kept in a particular folder. When eliciting the girls' views and opinions the parameters for the discussion emanated from the contents of their various books and folders – ie.these were

loosely used as the 'boundaries' of the various curriculum subjects. Whilst not wishing to explore, at this particular juncture, the possibility that the primary curriculum is not so integrated in nature now that the National Curriculum is firmly established, it would appear that the boundaries between the various 'classroom subjects' were clearly defined in the three schools where I carried out my particular research.

This chapter deals with the curriculum in terms of the material taught. The first section considers subjects to which the girls allocated a high status and which they felt were particularly relevant to themselves. This is followed by a section which looks at subjects which were allocated a lower status and were deemed by the girls to be less relevant to them. The reasons they had developed for their views are explored. Subject areas that were indicated to be enjoyable are then considered. The final section of the analysis explores aspects of schooling and areas of the curriculum that gave rise to misgivings and concerns for the girls.

To conclude the chapter there is a brief summary of the main themes that have emerged and any conclusions that may be drawn.

### **The Girls' Views of the Curriculum They Are Taught In Their Schools.**

#### **Subjects allocated high status and relevance by the girls.**

In schools certain subject areas within the school curriculum are given a higher profile and greater emphasis eg. mathematics, English – often obvious by the amount of teaching time devoted to the subject and the quantity, variety and availability of resources. This is further emphasised by the introduction of the Literacy and Numeracy Hours which, again, highlights the importance placed on these two subjects. Some subject lessons have always appeared to play a secondary role and have almost been 'squeezed' out of the timetable to become extra-curricular activities eg. music. The hierarchical structure of knowledge imparted in educational institutions and the academic status thus allocated is considered by Bernstein(1971). He indicates that with the organisation of the curriculum into

separate subjects competing subject sub-cultures within the organisation of the school may well develop. Some of these subject areas come to be more dominant than others and greater emphasis is placed on them thus giving them a higher status – most notable being the curriculum subjects of mathematics and English. This hierarchical nature of the overall curriculum can affect an individual pupil's experience of schooling – particularly when the issue of subject choice arises.

This issue is considered in detail by Reid(1984) who expresses the opinion that external forces and structures play a significant role in supporting and legitimating what is taught in schools – and also to a considerable degree determine how specific material and activities are actually taught. He describes these external forces as 'external publics' and they include groups such as the government, academic institutions, businesses, industries, parents and pupils. The forms of the school curriculum and activities associated with it have to have some significance for one or more of the external 'publics' or else they lose legitimation and may lose their support. Over periods of time aspects of subjects drop out of favour and new ones become incorporated within curriculum areas.

Whilst much of this discussion and debate concerning the hierarchical nature of the school curriculum appears to be based on the perceptions of the way secondary schools operate it is also legitimate in terms of primary education. Indeed the perceptions both the teachers and parents possess may well have been affected and developed from the views they acquired throughout their own education. These views in turn could affect their attitudes and approaches concerning the primary curriculum.

In a similar vein to Reid(1984), Goodson(1988) describes the school curriculum as a socio-historical product which possesses a definite hierarchy of subjects. He indicates that historically the emphasis has been on 'academic' subjects and these received priority treatment particularly in the form of finance and resources. This was very evident where grammar schools were concerned. Examinations were at the heart of the structure of the education system and generally resources were linked to the examinations – there was a

tendency for greater resources to be channelled to the more able and hence to academic subjects. Even when politics intervened and affected changes in the organisation of the educational system by introducing comprehensive schools in pursuit of equality of opportunity 'academic' subjects dominated. Any new subjects introduced had to present an academic rationale in order to be legitimated and gain resources.

Teachers themselves are aware of the hierarchical nature of the curriculum and Goodson(1988) points out that the interests of teachers, in terms of pay, promotion and conditions, are likely to be linked to their subject and the status the department holds within the school. 'Academic' subjects coming at the top of the hierarchy provide an individual teacher with better promotion prospects and also attract more 'able' students. This point of view is supported by Siskin(1994) who indicates that teachers associate very much with their own subject areas and view themselves as subject specialists and that the nature of their particular curriculum subject plays an important role in actually defining the individual teacher within the school. This may be in terms of their gender or their perceived status within the institution.

Measor(1984) explores how pupils themselves perceive the curriculum and how they allocate status to different school subjects. She concludes that, along with the different kinds of status, different areas of the curriculum have different meanings for the pupils. These are influenced by the pupils' own culture, by the pupils' gender in that certain activities are seen as appropriate for girls and others for boys, by the pupils' social class and by their ethnic origins. Another factor in the pupils' perceptions of subject status is the significance they perceive the subject to have in relation to adult life and the world of work. In this context mathematics and English are viewed as the most important subjects and are seen as enabling pupils to cope with and be more competent in the real world outside school. These subjects are seen as the 'basics' and are given high value and generally the pupils tend to be more attentive in these lessons. Measor(1984) further comments on aspects of pupil behaviour in that their behaviour is likely to vary in



different subject areas. Where mathematics and English are concerned the pupils are far more likely to approach the lessons in a more formal manner and tend to adopt a conformist attitude and not indulge in 'deviant' behaviour.

Stables(1997) also considers pupils' perspectives on the different curriculum subjects and how they come to choose subjects for study later in their school careers. He concludes that they show little awareness of the traditional biases they exhibit in their ideas and interests and that they do not view their education as of holistic personal value. The pupils tend to possess very narrow opinions in terms of the relevance of subjects to them as individuals. This is reinforced by Paechter(2000) who indicates that pupils concentrate on gaining credentials that they believe will help them in the future – this in turn leads to them focussing on the requirements of higher status subjects. These are areas of knowledge that are seen as being more powerful in that they are able to demand a greater portion of curriculum time and, in some instances eg. science, more institutional space. The academic areas that tend to have the highest status in the school system are mathematics, English and science. This is highlighted by Paechter(2000) who indicates that the National Curriculum has not changed the basic hierarchy of subjects and that even though the government and policy-makers have tried to raise the status of some subject areas, particularly areas of the practical curriculum, they have not really succeeded. Paechter(1998b) explores issues surrounding the significance of power and knowledge in the classroom. This debate centres around the fact that school knowledge differs from that found and used in the world outside the school. The knowledge espoused within educational institutions is that valued by the middle and upper classes and this can have an effect on some pupils who therefore find it difficult to engage with school. It may also mean that some working-class pupils could become excluded from aspects of education that would enable them to gain more 'power' because they have difficulty in adapting to the knowledge codes that are at the forefront in their schools. Basically school knowledge is that valued by dominant groups in society and generally the emphasis is on

written rather than oral work. High status school knowledge is usually seen as non-vocational in contrast to lower status knowledge which tends to be relevant to the needs of everyday life and is often referred to as 'skills'.

These ideas of a hierarchical structure of knowledge are also emphasised in the National Curriculum with its 'core' subjects. The subjects that are seen to be the most important are highlighted in the annual publication of 'league tables' of primary school S.A.T.'s results (T.E.S. January 30<sup>th</sup> 1998). The only subjects 'tested' are mathematics, English and science ('core' subjects) – thus giving these subjects priority status. Each year when these results enter the public domain there is much debate and discussion concerning any 'trends' and these are highlighted in the national press etc. – again emphasising the relative significance of these subjects to the general public. Over recent years many politicians have been engaged in a very public campaign emphasising the need to 'return to basics' in terms of children's education. This firmly emphasises the need for basic literacy and numeracy – again highlighting the subjects of mathematics and English.

The mothers of the girls who were the focus of this research reinforced the view that mathematics and English were, in their opinion, of particular relevance and significance. They placed emphasis on the importance that their daughters should be proficient in these areas and also voiced concerns if the individual girls were experiencing difficulties in any aspects of these particular subjects. In terms of schooling it was deemed a necessity to master these two curriculum areas – a child's academic performance appeared to be measured by their progress in both mathematics and English. These were the 'yardsticks' used by the mothers as to whether or not their child was succeeding and making appropriate academic progress. Other curriculum subjects were not mentioned in this manner or context.

Comments from the mothers of girls attending High Wood School included:

“She’s been slower reading than the other two (her sisters). It’s very difficult she has a younger sister who’s very quick on the uptake. Sally’s struggled. I have to try and have her on her own away from the others to work with. I work really hard with her at home.”

(Sally’s mother)

“My daughter is not terribly hot at maths – but then no-one is in my family. She has extra tuition.”

(Ellie’s mother)

“I’ve suddenly realised she hasn’t been making sufficient progress in her reading and writing. I’d known she’d not taken to reading in the way my son did. We read a lot together still and I make her read from the beginning to the end of each word because when she’s reading on her own she misses it all.”

(Kathy’s mother)

Where these mothers were concerned if, in their eyes, their daughters were not progressing as they should it was essential that they were assisted to achieve appropriately. This assistance either took the form of the mothers themselves providing support and help in the areas where the girls were experiencing difficulties or they paid for private tuition. On the whole the mothers at High Wood School felt equipped to provide much ‘support teaching’ themselves. If they indicated that ‘professional’ help was required they were both willing and able to pay for extra tuition outside of the normal school day.

Comments from the mothers of girls attending Whitemoor School included:

“She struggles with maths. Perhaps she doesn’t realise she struggles with it – but she comes home and we have to go down the library and get maths books to remind me. What I like when they send them sheets home there’s always an example by the side how to do it. Once I’ve seen the example I can remember how to do it.”

(Tracy’s mother)

“She didn’t seem to get on with her reading. She didn’t play up she just – a lot of it was to do with she didn’t go to school so she wasn’t the standard of the rest of the children. She went in Mrs. G’s (remedial teacher’s) class – she helps with the reading.”

(Mandy’s mother)

“She has special needs – she is catching up now. Mrs.S.(special needs teacher) said if she hadn’t had what she’s having now by the time she went to secondary school she’d be really behind. Having the extra tuition she should be up level.”

(Val’s mother)

These mothers also expressed concerns if their daughters appeared to be struggling to ‘keep up’ with the other children in the class. Here ‘private lessons’ were not an option – the mothers either provided help themselves, as in the case of Tracy’s mother, or they depended on the school itself to provide support and help. This was in the form of remedial classes that took place during the school day – the girls attended these instead of their normal class lessons. These mothers often felt that they were not sufficiently able to provide help themselves and depended on the school to do so.

The subjects the girls themselves identified as ‘high’ status also tended to be mathematics and English. These were mainly perceived in terms of their usefulness and importance for adult life and the world of work. Occupations were cited where mathematics and English would be considered pre-requisites and instances in everyday life were quoted where they would be invaluable.

Comments from the girls at High Wood Primary School included:

“...when you grow up you’ll need English skills to get a good job. English makes sure you get a really good education and you need writing anywhere you go and reading. If you work at an accountant’s or something or a bank you need maths skills.”

(Anna)

“...because when you get older and you start working – even if you work in a fish and

chip shop you still have to be good at maths.”

(Ellie)

“English is most important because you’ve got to learn handwriting, how to spell cos when you want to get a job in the future or go to college you’ve got to be able to spell, to write nicely because when you’re applying for a job you need to do that.”

(Jane)

These statements show that the girls felt that adequate skills in both mathematics and English are fundamental for coping with adulthood and essential for gaining appropriate employment. The nature of this employment was indicated by some of the ‘work’ mentioned eg. banking, accountancy – they were mentioned in a ‘positive’ light whereas working in a fish and chip shop was considered rather dismissively by Ellie as not really an appropriate form of employment for her. Proficiency in English was also viewed as a necessity to be ‘well-educated’ – indicated by both Anna and Jane. The latter saw this as a means to gaining access to ‘higher’ education. This very much reflected the educational backgrounds of these girls’ families.

In a similar way to the girls at High Wood School, the girls at Whitemoor School saw that being proficient in mathematics and English is desirable for coping with adult life and gaining employment. This was illustrated by the following comments:

“...maths and English cos them two are really important cos if you don’t know your maths you can’t get a job and if you don’t know how to read or spell then you can’t get a job either. You’ve got to learn how to read, spell and write – and if you can’t do any of them you’ve got no future for yourself.”

(Judy)

“Because if you write a letter or an application form you’ve got to have neat writing cos if you go for a job like a book writer you’ve got to be a neat writer or else people can’t understand your writing and it’s scruffy and they don’t want you to be a writer.”

“Say if you like work in a factory – say Cadbury’s – there are so many bars of chocolate in a box and you have to add them together – you’ve got to be able to calculate.”

(Vicky)

“Most important I think maths, reading and writing. Because even if you’re er....a football player or a disco dancer you’ve got to be able to sign your autographs, you’ve got to be able to read your fan mail and you’ve got to be able to count how many golden discs or trophies you’ve got.”

(Louisa)

“Maths – yeh for like working in shops – doing sums. Like if you’ve got to work out how much you owe someone if you’ve borrowed it. If you’re going on holiday you have to work out how much money you’ll need, the cost to get there.”

(Val)

Whilst expressing similar views to the girls from the rural school there were some very noticeable differences. Adult work mentioned here included ‘lower’ status employment such as working in a factory or a shop – comments made by Vicky and Val. This very much reflected the different life experiences the suburban girls had compared to the rural girls – the vast majority of the suburban girls’ immediate contacts were involved in ‘lower’ status work and they had limited dealings with people pursuing ‘higher’ status occupations.

Steedman(1982) explores how young working-class girls make sense of, and interpret, their own home and family life and use it to imagine what their own future will be like. In a similar manner to the majority of the suburban girls in this research they have somewhat limited perspectives which are constructed from their own immediate experiences. Taking this issue a stage further Reay(1998) shows how this limited perspective can have a serious effect on working-class pupils in terms of their possible selection of higher education. This process is far simpler for middle-class pupils as they do not experience the working-class pupils’ lack of understanding of the system which is precipitated by a

combination of factors such as lack of advice and lack of role-models. Limitations are also imposed on working-class pupils in terms of material and financial constraints.

An issue raised by Val was that proficiency at mathematics gives an individual the ability to manage personal finances. The comment also indicated that money, or the lack of it, can be a problem for some families and this may involve borrowing money. Indeed, some of the material circumstances of the suburban families were very poor. This was not generally a circumstance that appeared to arise in the families of the rural children who materially enjoyed a comparatively high standard of living.

Louisa and Vicky hinted at what were perceived as somewhat more glamorous and attractive professions in their eyes – book writer, footballer and disco dancer – but this too was tempered with reality in that these people also have to cope with basic mathematical skills and English skills. However, there was a slight hint of a ‘flight of fancy’ – a contrast to what they saw as ‘normal’ occupations and the possibility of succeeding by pursuing a more attractive profession. It possibly indicates, given their experiences, what these girls saw as successful careers.

Walkerdine(1997) considers working-class girls’ ‘dreams of escape’ with their ideal of being able to enter a ‘glamour profession’ which in their eyes is their mark of a successful life. She looks at how their image of success is formulated from watching the likes of pop stars, film stars etc. – a complete contrast to their own experience of ‘normal’ everyday life and an escape from the mundane.

Overall the girls seemed to strongly endorse the current educational trend supported by politicians for a definite emphasis on the teaching of basic skills centred around numeracy and literacy.

#### **Subjects allocated lower status and less relevance by the girls.**

Despite the subject science being officially identified as ‘high’ status in terms of the National Curriculum (ie. being designated as a ‘core’ subject) it was not seen as particularly relevant or significant by the girls in any of the research schools. Generally it

was not interpreted as being a 'useful' subject –even by girls who indicated that they may like to follow professions in adult life which, in reality, involve a considerable scientific content. The link between the science taught in school and these professions was not made by the girls concerned. Virtually none of the girls mentioned science as being particularly enjoyable or as their favourite subject. The only facets of science that were indicated to be of particular interest were those involving the study of animals and creatures and practical experiments but generally, frequent references to the science lessons being boring were made. These views were summed up in the following comments:

"I don't like sorting out solutions. I've never really liked it. It's always been boring to me. The animal stuff is nice but separating sand and water....."

(Jane – High Wood School)

"It's boring. It is just cos you're learning about electricity and stuff like that. I think that electricity is boring."

(Toni – Whitemoor School)

"Well the bit I like about science is doing all the experiments but when it comes down to like recording it all down – I'm not very good at writing apparatus and all that down. I like doing it."

(Louisa – Whitemoor School)

Frequently the content of the science curriculum seemed to lack relevance to the girls and the way work was recorded again did not seem particularly relevant. Enthusiasm was expressed concerning science work approached practically in small groups and this was deemed enjoyable and had some point to the girls – then diminished by the form the written account had to take. It was generally the biology content of the science curriculum that was found enjoyable and acceptable. The areas of physics and chemistry tended to engender lack of interest.



Kelly(1987) explores why girls at school often disassociate themselves from science – particularly physics and chemistry – and looks at social factors linking science and masculinity. She considers the variety of ways in which schools may perpetuate the idea of ‘masculine science’ and suggests that often the way in which science is presented and general classroom behaviour and interactions in mixed gender classes may well play a significant role in girls developing negative attitudes towards the subject. Kelly’s research explores these issues with pupils experiencing the ‘secondary’ phase of their education. It would appear that the primary age girls who were the subject of this research indicated similar views and opinions concerning facets of their science curriculum – physics and chemistry invoking negative feelings and biology giving rise to more positive feelings. Further to this, Kelly’s research was carried out in the 1980’s prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum. Despite the implementation of this and various attempts to make science more acceptable to girls, little appears to have changed where these primary school girls are concerned. Whyte(1985) looks in detail at the G.I.S.T. project which was designed to explore means of making science more ‘girl friendly’. She concluded that the personal attitudes of the teachers and the climate of the individual schools play a considerable role in whether or not initiatives for change in the approach to the science curriculum and lessons are successful. Often interventions mean that the girls have more positive attitudes towards science and no longer view it as a purely male domain, but when the issue of ‘subject choice’ arises there is little increase in the number of girls opting for science subjects – particularly the physical sciences ie. physics and chemistry.

This view is confirmed by Gillborn(1990) who explores how gender appears to play a prominent role in this issue. He indicates that often the way the option pattern in the school is structured and the perceptions and ambitions of the individual pupils leads to them making choices which illustrate the traditional pattern of male and female roles. This is particularly the case with science-based subjects. Gillborn concludes that

frequently teachers, wittingly or unwittingly, actively reinforce gender stereotypes in terms of certain subject options.

It would appear that the primary age girls who were the focus of this research were already expressing quite negative views concerning aspects of their science lessons. This was despite experiencing what is considered to be an appropriate, well-balanced science curriculum as laid down by the National Curriculum. Already the seeds were being sown for the decisions they will make in terms of subject options in the next phase of their education.

The girls' mothers themselves hardly seemed to mention science in connection with their daughters and certainly did not place emphasis on it as a high status subject. In fact the only mother who talked about science in connection with primary education was Jane's mother and she said:

"The National Curriculum as it came in has driven out the basics. My primary education was the 3R's. I didn't do a great deal of anything else. My education was mainly maths all morning and English all afternoon. In fact now I think it's too wide. I think they've tried to put the secondary curriculum into the primary. I'd go with the Steiner bit – no science until they're fourteen. I think the concepts are too difficult for them to do it."

Jane's mother indicated that she felt that science did not have a place in the primary curriculum and really it should only be taught at secondary school level – her feeling was that the primary school should focus on the 'basics' ie. mathematics and English. This was a particularly interesting perspective as Jane's mother was herself a primary school teacher.

Comments the other mothers made included:

"My science education at secondary school was nil. It was awful. The science and maths education at the school was poor."

(Kathy's mother)

“I was told that you definitely need typing and shorthand, commerce, speedwriting – that sort of thing – so do those. It never entered my head to do a science. No-one ever said to me do you fancy doing a science.”

(Tracy’s mother)

“They put the sciences against the art. We definitely went down one line.”

(Jane’s mother)

“I was brilliant at biology. It was something that clicked. I hated physics.”

(Toni’s mother)

In terms of their own science education the mothers did not appear to view the subject in a very positive light. They either disliked all, or some, aspects of science as a subject or felt that their science education was lacking in the particular schools they attended. There seemed to be the general impression that when they came to ‘choose options’ that they either chose science subjects or arts’ subjects – in some cases the emphasis being on practical or vocational subjects. Some of the mothers gave the distinct impression that science was not really being offered to them as an option but they were expected to follow courses that were ‘traditionally’ perceived as appropriate for girls – specifically highlighted by Tracy’s mother. Whilst the ‘choice’ was, in terms of the mothers, related to the later stages of their education these strong views and opinions obviously remained with them – possibly colouring and affecting their attitudes in terms of this particular curriculum area.

Measor(1984) indicates that gender affects the way pupils view school subjects and where the sciences are concerned the gender issue becomes important. She points out that the majority of girls have objections to doing physical science and to a considerable extent the different branches of science exhibit gender allegiance – physical science being male dominated and girls, if they study a science, are more likely to participate in the subject of biology. Siskin(1994) further highlights gender patterns concerning different facets of the school curriculum – this time from the perspective of the teachers. He

indicates that teachers strongly identify with their own subject and in the cases of mathematics and the sciences the majority of the teachers are male – in contrast to English where the majority of teachers are women. This may well lead to a male-oriented culture within many science departments and also influence the approach and attitudes in the actual teaching of the subject material – in turn perhaps leading to girls feeling it is not an appropriate area of study for them or one with which they would feel comfortable. Pacchter(2000) also indicates that science departments are frequently male dominated and that science is an area of knowledge that is perceived to be one of the most powerful on the curriculum – using its power to gain greater access to curriculum time and specialised institutional space. On the whole the more powerful knowledges tend to be perceived as masculine in gender. This inevitably may well affect the attitudes of the female pupils. These attitudes become particularly significant when the individual pupils have to choose subjects for further study – girls tending not to select science subjects because of their perceived masculinity and therefore precluding themselves from some of the more ‘powerful’ subjects.

Stables(1997) perceives a strong link between career intentions and subject choice. He points out that pupils are often less committed to equal opportunities than teachers and that their career aspirations are heavily divided along gender-stereotypical lines. Further to this Stables(1997) indicates that many pupils showed little awareness of the very traditional biases they exhibited in their ideas and interests. A major concern is how pupils seem unaware of the need to exhibit ‘balance’ when making subject choices. Stables(1997) emphasises the needs for schools to consider carefully the aims of their programmes of subject choice in order that pupils feel able to choose the best balanced programme of study appropriate for their own individual skills and talents. In terms of the girls’ mothers who participated in this research it would appear that they were definitely ‘channelled’ into certain fields of study by their schools – more often than not ‘arts’ subjects or practical and vocational subjects. They did not seem to feel that they had had a

great deal of say in the options they ended up studying – in particular there did not appear to have been any active encouragement for them to participate in certain science subjects.

Other subjects that the girls themselves frequently saw as being not particularly relevant to them and expressed a lack of interest in were the humanities subjects of history, geography and religious education. Where history was concerned, one or two girls particularly enjoyed the subject because they liked learning about the past but the majority had reservations about the subject content and didn't see the significance of investigating past times. This was illustrated in the following comments:

"It's boring. Well you're learning about the olden days and some bits get boring. I prefer to learn about wars and things – cos you can ask your Nans and Grandads about everything."

(Toni – Whitemoor School)

"Sometimes I find it boring because that was then and this is now. We're here so why do we want to know about something that happened a thousand years ago. We don't want to know what happened to some king."

(Louisa – Whitemoor School)

"I'm not really a history maniac but my Mum loves it. I think it's just going over everything. We read the books and then at the end of the lesson Mr.Jones says 'Okay we'll do a bit of writing' and then we have to stay in at playtimes if we don't finish it. I don't really like finding out about things in the past. I don't like the Romans. I quite liked the Aztecs."

(Linda – High Wood School)

The girls' emphasis appeared to be on a dislike of looking at the past – the more 'ancient' history appeared rather remote from them and not relevant to their lives. In contrast, topics looking at more recent events where they can communicate with people, particularly relatives who were alive at that particular time, seemed more tangible.

Obviously, the inclusion of people and their own personal experiences appealed to the girls and captured their interest.

One of the least popular subjects was geography which was frequently labelled with the epithet 'boring'. In a similar way to history some topics or aspects of the subject were found enjoyable – either a particular topic was of interest or the specific approach to learning was enjoyable. On the whole, issues that could be related to themselves were the ones that raised the most interest. Generally, the suburban school girls tended to have a more negative view of this subject than the girls at High Wood School who tended to balance out a negative comment with something positive ie. an aspect or approach that they enjoyed. They were not so forceful in their condemnation of the subject and highlighted certain specific areas of the subject about which they wished to comment eg.

“We wrote about countries – climate and stuff. I quite liked that because my Aunty lived in Tasmania so I wrote about that. We did weather once. I didn't like weather.”

(Linda – High Wood School)

“.....it sometimes gets a bit boring because there's lots of facts and stuff you've got to learn. When we did an individual project and every geography lesson we just got out our own stuff that was fun because we were all doing different things.”

(Jane – High Wood School)

These comments highlight the positive aspects of geography and specific teaching approaches ie. that individual topics or issues had some relevance to the individual child.

The whole subject had no significance for Judy highlighted in her comment:

“Geography's kind of boring – why do you have to map all places in the world when sometimes you're never going to see them – you're not going to go to places. Cos like my Mum doesn't have any money. It's not bad learning about the city streets – all around England cos you might learn about the United Kingdom and you know sometime in your life you're going to go around England – but about America or Australia or Japan or Rio

de Janeiro – it's stupid cos you're not going to go there.”

(Judy – Whitemoor School)

This comment was made very forcefully almost indicating that Judy felt her time was being wasted. It indicated how she felt that her family circumstances were such that much of the subject material had little meaning or relevance to her – or, on the other hand, it could just be indicative of her ignorance.

Religious Education was perhaps the least popular of all the curriculum areas discussed and elicited some extremely strong opinions from the girls. Only one girl, Jane from High Wood School, made a positive comment concerning the subject but that was linked to her own personal beliefs as she did not particularly enjoy her R.E. lessons in school. She said:

“I'm a Christian myself and it does get a bit boring sometimes because Mr. Jones is always talking about things we know about – like in assembly nearly every month he tells the story of 'The Good Samaritan'. I do believe in Jesus Christ and I'm reading the Bible all the time and my favourite books are Genesis and Exodus.”

(Jane – High Wood School)

Jane and her family were regular churchgoers – as were two of the other families I interviewed at High Wood School. Many of the girls at High Wood School had connections with the local church in that they attended activities based at the church eg. brownies, guides etc. Also with their school being a church aided primary school it has many connections with the local church and the vicar was a frequent visitor at the school. Although they did not necessarily enjoy their R.E. lessons none of the High Wood girls totally discounted the church or religion as having no relevance for them. Some of them expressed a passing interest in hearing about other religions – an area studied at school.

In contrast, the girls from the suburban schools were extremely dismissive of religion and its personal significance to them. None of the families I interviewed were regular church attenders. Even hearing about other religions was dismissed as being irrelevant –

it just did not have any significance to their lives. Comments made concerning R.E. included:

“I don’t like religious things. I don’t really believe in it – you don’t really need religion. You can get on without it. I don’t really enjoy religion. I don’t think many other people do – unless you become a priest or something.”

(Toni – Whitemoor School)

“R.E. is about God and Jesus – I don’t really believe in God or Jesus. They’re just very good stories.”

(Tracy – Whitemoor School)

“It’s boring cos you like learn about the Hindu gods – what do you want to know about them because you’re not going to join that religion are you?”

(Louisa – Whitemoor School)

Generally speaking the suburban girls tended to be more negative concerning the humanities subjects and frequently indicated the lack of relevance they had for them. This tended to evolve from the girls being unable to find any personal links to their lives and families. In these terms the subjects were often quite categorically dismissed. They were not seen as useful in terms of adult life and the world of work. These girls did not seem to place a very great emphasis on the idea of ‘knowledge for knowledge’s sake’. The girls in the rural village school were not anywhere near so dismissive and indicated that areas of these subjects could be interesting. In many instances they saw, or found, some personal relevance in these academic subjects.

In terms of the school curriculum, it would appear that the social background of the individual girls interviewed had a significant role to play in their attitude towards different academic areas. Indeed, Arnot(1986) indicates that pupils from differing backgrounds experience school in a diversity of ways. She emphasises that sometimes home and school cultures clash and that this may be instrumental in working-class pupils, particularly girls, not taking advantage of all the educational opportunities that are



available to them. In many instances the working-class girls in this research did not appear to relate to a number of aspects of their school curriculum because they perceived them as not being relevant to their everyday lives. There appeared to be a conflict between the culture espoused by the school and that which was accepted as normal by the working-class pupils. This was possibly resulting in the beginnings of rejecting aspects of education and schooling which, at a later date, may prove to be contributory factors in a pattern of underachievement or severely limited career opportunities.

Arnot(1986) also considers the historical development of state education for girls and how, in the past, it was assumed that girls should receive a different education from that received by boys. The emphasis in terms of girls was that middle-class girls would learn to behave in a decorous manner – highlighting politeness and social graces – whereas working-class girls were expected to learn practical skills linked to domesticity. Even after the 1944 Education Act there was still differentiation in terms of gender but further attempts had been made to alleviate differentiation in terms of social class with the introduction of a more meritocratic system ie. the inception of the eleven plus examination to supposedly enable pupils from all social backgrounds to have the opportunity to succeed academically.

With the introduction of the National Curriculum one would assume that differential access to the school curriculum in terms of gender and social background should disappear. However, it would appear that the situation is more complex than simply access to curricular areas – the working-class girls who were the focus of this research were already beginning to limit their ‘ future options’ by steering towards a less academic curriculum and thus possibly contributing to their own future disadvantage.

This view is supported by Stanley(1989) and Riddell(1992) – the latter concluding that the National Curriculum is unlikely to improve the situation of girls and emphasising the role of the cultures of pupils and their families in producing gender divisions in the curriculum. However, Riddell(1992) highlights the fact that schools and teachers play an

active role in this – either positively or negatively. This issue concerning the part played by teachers is further underlined by Burwood(1992) who considers whether or not the National Curriculum can help reduce working-class underachievement. He concludes that the content of the curriculum offers little as by its nature the National Curriculum is subject based and historically working-class pupils have underachieved with this type of curriculum. From his perspective the positive outcomes lie in the manner in which the teacher presents the curricular material. If an effort is made to reduce the gulf between everyday experience and classroom experience there may well be positive results in terms of academic achievement.

In terms of the humanities subjects of history, geography and religious education the mothers made very few comments concerning their importance and relevance as areas of study in school. Only one mother, Linda's mother, indicated that she felt that these subjects had significance in terms of schooling and showed a personal interest and willingness to provide 'extra' help where these areas of study were concerned. This was illustrated in the following comment she made:

"I find out what projects they're doing. I think I rely on the school to take the lead but I like to provide lots of other interests for her – even academic interests. I'm an academic type of person really. My favourite place in the world is the library. I try to worm in some slightly more challenging things – not only just fiction. I'm always getting books for her from the library. Subjects she perhaps shows an interest in."

(Linda's mother – High Wood School)

Other mothers from High Wood School indicated that, in their views, the humanities subjects were decidedly peripheral in terms of the main primary school curriculum and could be pursued as hobbies or interests outside school. They were almost viewed as desirable, cultural extras. This was indicated in the following comments:

"We're very keen on history and old buildings and gardening. Every other weekend in

the summer we visit a stately home or open garden. Sally's interested in that."

(Sally's mother – High Wood School)

"We're into the National Trust and English Heritage. We're life members of the National Trust and my husband, Roger, is into the Civil War."

"On holidays we don't overdo it – you have to combine the art with the fun really."

(Jane's mother – High Wood School)

This idea of 'educational visits' or cultural aspects of holidays was a re-occurring theme where the mothers at High Wood School were concerned.

Jane's mother also expressed concern over the breadth of the primary school curriculum. This was illustrated in the following comment that she made;

"She's getting more sort of like fingers dipped in lots of pies but I'm not sure she's getting anything in more depth. My husband says we'll have generations of kids that know a lot about the Aztecs, a lot about the Romans but they don't know anything in the middle. Lack of chronology worries me."

(Jane's mother – High Wood School)

Many of the mothers certainly gave the impression, as discussed earlier, that the main purpose of the primary school was to emphasise literacy and numeracy. This perspective was particularly developed by Jane's mother who directly criticised the breadth of the National Curriculum. As she herself was actively involved in the education system in the primary sector her views may be particularly noteworthy. In general the mothers associated their own primary education as being focussed around numeracy and literacy skills and very little else.

The mothers of the girls from the suburban schools also emphasised the importance of mathematics and English and little, or no, mention was made of the humanities' subjects. Only one mother, Judy's mother, spoke about these subjects and that was to indicate her own lack of knowledge in the area and therefore gave a reason for her inability to assist her daughter with her homework. She said:

“I hated R.E. You’d get a teacher talking about religion and that was it. I was also never one for history – so if she brings a project home on history you’ve got no chance.”

(Judy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

With the mothers from the two suburban schools there were also very few indications that they took their children on educational visits at weekends and during school holidays. This was highly likely to be due, in the majority of cases, to financial constraints – very simply they were unable to afford this type of outing or visit. In Chapter Four the family backgrounds of the girls are outlined. It can be seen that three of the suburban mothers were single parents with more than one child to care for and in two of the other suburban families neither of the parents were engaged in full-time employment outside the home. Further to this the majority of the suburban parents who were employed were engaged in occupations that could be classified as unskilled and comparatively poorly paid. This would indicate that these families were perhaps restricted in terms of the availability of personal finance.

The issue of transport availability was also a likely factor to affect the extent and frequency of family outings and trips. Where the suburban families were concerned the majority of them were partially or totally dependent on public transport as they did not possess a car. In terms of the mothers only Toni’s mother had full access to a car. This inevitably raised the issue of further expense in terms of outings and also limited the distance range of these visits because of the reliance on public transport. Where the families who lived in a rural environment were concerned this was not a contentious matter – they all had ready access to personal transport which was actually essential for them because of the limited availability of public transport. It was an accepted part of their life-style that they had to use personal transport for virtually all journeys. This provided greater flexibility than was available to the suburban mothers and also extended the distance range for visits and outings.

Stables(1997) points out that the views of different groups of people concerning the school curriculum are very much affected by the conceptions they have of what the curriculum is meant to achieve. In terms of the girls' mothers their over-riding concern was that the primary schools concentrated on transmitting appropriate literacy and numeracy skills. They tended to have quite narrow views concerning the relevance of other subjects. To a great extent their opinions appeared to be based on their own school experiences – the humanities' subjects had more relevance in the secondary phase of education. The middle-class mothers saw the humanities as areas that could be pursued as a form of cultural recreation.

Pachter(2000) indicates that the National Curriculum has not really altered the basic hierarchy of curriculum subjects – the most significant areas being mathematics, English and science. The subjects most affected by the introduction of the National Curriculum have been what can be termed as the marginal subjects – if anything history and geography have now become slightly more marginal.

#### **Subject areas indicated as being enjoyable by the girls.**

The subjects which, on the whole, were deemed the most enjoyable were art, P.E. and games, music and some aspects of English – specifically reading. In many cases these were pursued by the girls in their own time – in the form of related hobbies and music lessons. In the schools used for the purpose of this research instrument lessons were available for pupils for a payment. The vast majority of these lessons were taken up by girls. In the rural village school a much greater range of instrumental lessons were available and a few girls played several instruments – a notable number of girls at this school also had private music lessons out of school hours.

The subject that was found most enjoyable of all was art and craft. Comments illustrating this were:

“I like drawing, mixing all the colours. It's a bit of an escape from writing.”

(Linda – High Wood School)

“I quite look forward to art because that’s like a break at the end of the week.”

(Jane – High Wood School)

“Art I just love it – well it’s just great the way you use your pencil – and like you’re drawing it and then you can paint it or put chalk on. Cos last time in Year 4 I done it was like a sun with lots an’ lots of things and reflects cos all ya done is put black on and scribbly lines in the water – but it was brilliant.”

(Mandy – Whitemoor School)

“Art’s fun, it’s creative and you get to do all different sketches. I’ve done quite a lot of drawings. The best drawing I’ve done is of a whale – the whale looks as though it’s going to jump out at you.”

(Vicky – Whitemoor School)

The girls from High Wood School gave the impression that art was something pursued for pleasure and in terms of the school curriculum it was viewed as ‘light relief’ from the real business of other subjects which were classified as work by the girls. This was particularly highlighted in the comments that Linda and Jane made. The view given was that it was not a ‘serious subject’. The girls from Whitemoor School found the subject equally as enjoyable as the High Wood girls but they spoke at greater length and highlighted instances when they produced something they were proud of and this had significance for them. They recalled with pride specific pieces of work that gave them an obvious source of success. This was not evident in the High Wood girls – they did not mention individual pieces of work.

Perhaps at this point it is pertinent to acknowledge that pupils in different schools may well not have the same experiences of the subjects that are a part of their overall curriculum. Certain subjects, particularly art and music, are more open to an individual teacher’s personal flair and enthusiasm and this could account for pupils seeing the subject in such a positive light.

Where this research is concerned, the schools at its centre were very different in nature – one of the major differences being that two of the schools were large suburban ‘junior’ schools and the third school was a small rural ‘primary’ school. The comparative size of the schools had a considerable bearing on how the staff were deployed to deliver the National Curriculum – this too could affect the standard of delivery of various curricular areas. The issue as to whether or not small schools can competently deliver the National Curriculum is discussed by Hargreaves et al(1996). They concluded that in matters of the curriculum the teachers in small schools are generally as confident as those in larger schools and the heads of these schools have more active involvement in the curriculum and its delivery than their counterparts in larger schools. However, the actual effectiveness of the teaching of the national Curriculum with a limited number of staff and lack of specialist teachers in some spheres is an area that lends itself to further research.

P.E. and games, or specific aspects of the lessons, were enjoyed by all of the girls. Every girl interviewed mentioned some pleasurable activity. This was illustrated in the following comments:

“Well I think I’m quite good at it – well netball. Emma and I go to netball club. I like P.E. down the hall cos I go to gymnastics. I like doing all the hanging, swinging and jumping over the boxes and things.”

(Linda – High Wood School)

“P.E. you can do dancing and go on the apparatus. Games you can do sports like netball – cos I was captain of the netball team.”

(Suzie – Westfield Acre School)

“I love it. P.E. you can get healthy. Games is just like brilliant cos you can find out all different games.”

(Mandy – Whitemoor School)

In a similar way to P.E. and games, virtually all of the girls found some facet of music enjoyable – however, their main sources of enjoyment appeared to be outside of the class music lessons and centred around the playing of instruments or being members of the school choir. The pupils of High Wood definitely placed their emphasis on instrument playing as indicated in the quote made by Anna:

“I like singing and I play lots of different instruments. I like being able to play them and it’s different to everybody else knowing I can play those instruments.”

(Anna – High Wood School)

The majority of the girls at High Wood School were in either the choir or the orchestra, or both, and they frequently participated in concerts or performances in the locality. Rather surprisingly this was rarely mentioned unless the individuals were prompted. It did not appear to be anything greatly significant and was just accepted as a ‘normal’ event or activity. In contrast to this, being a member of the school choir or participating in a performance was considered to be rather special and a source of pride to the suburban girls. Being a member of the school choir was given considerable status amongst the girls and those who did not ‘get in’ the choir mentioned this with regret. The ability to ‘perform’ and take part in productions was a highlight to the suburban girls:

“I’m in the choir – I’m one of the best singers. I can do solos and that. I sang in the production – I sang on me own in front of all the people – two nights in a row. I’m a good singer. I can get my notes out. I like playing music.”

(Suzie – Westfield Acre School)

“I’m in the choir right and doing ‘Grease’ is really exciting cos you like act trendy and hip and everything – you can make songs about your feelings and stuff like that.”

(Judy – Whitemoor School)

These girls obviously felt a sense of achievement and taking part in a production was viewed as different and exciting. It was most probably a total contrast to their ‘normal’



everyday activities at home and at school. They gained personal status by being, in their eyes, in the 'spotlight' at a public performance.

The value and significance of 'school performances' for individual pupils and the wider school community is explored by Woods(1993). He concludes that these events can have a lasting beneficial effect on individuals, both in terms of their academic and their social development. This would appear to be the case with a number of the girls interviewed – particularly some of the suburban girls. They seem to have gained a very positive view of themselves from their experiences as 'performers'.

Despite the significance and enjoyment gained from the subjects art, music, P.E. and games they were frequently dismissed as of no great importance – they were considered to be enjoyable but were discounted because 'you don't learn much' and were given a comparatively low status. The attendant skills were rather summarily dismissed as not being particularly relevant or important. This was particularly so with the girls from High Wood School.

The mothers of the girls from High Wood School seemed to view the subjects of music, art and craft and P.E. as areas in which they could provide extra help and opportunities. This took the form of lessons and coaching outside school time, the provision of materials and equipment in the home and, in some instances, the personal time and assistance of the individual mothers. Some of the girls participated in an 'extra' lesson, a club or coaching session nearly every evening. All of these activities were viewed as being culturally and socially worthwhile. They were seen as enriching the girls' education. Comments the High Wood mothers made included:

"She likes to make things – make things out of materials. She'll make things out of cereal boxes, toilet rolls. We listen to music and we do a lot of reading, drawing and making things."

(Rachel's mother – High Wood School)

“She’s quite creative. She’s always wanting to make things. She’s got the most amazing bedroom. She’s designed this bedroom as underwater. I did the painting but she designed it completely – dark blue walls and ceiling and it’s all sort of dolphin friezes.

Gymnastics is a big interest in her life. She goes to this club once a week with her brother. They’re quite agile and we’ve got things in the garden – trapeze things and rings.”

(Linda’s mother – High Wood School)

“She’s very artistic. She’s interested in the violin. She’s very keen on it. She used to do a lot of dance when she was younger. She’s quite a theatrical type of person. She loves her gymnastics which she does every week. She used to have a pony. She reads an awful lot and draws a lot. They go swimming and ice-skating.”

(Ellie’s mother – High Wood School)

Only one of the suburban girls actually attended an organised club or activity outside school and that was Louisa who had swimming lessons. This was a very popular activity and nearly all of these girls regularly went swimming. The local swimming pool was easily accessible and the girls usually went there with a group of friends. On the whole the suburban girls and their families tended to view activities outside school involving art, music and P.E. as purely social or as hobbies to fill their time – rather than educationally enriching. Comments made by the mothers about their daughters’ involvement in these activities included:

“She dances in her bedroom and blasts music out.”

(Toni’s mother – Whitemoor School)

“She likes to make clothes. I do knitting and she likes to have a go.”

(Mandy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

“She paints a lot. She’s always doing arty things. She’s always making things.”

(Louisa’s mother – Whitemoor School)

These appeared to be activities that the girls organised themselves and pursued on their own for their own entertainment and to occupy themselves. The emphasis was not on being 'taught' anything or an organised activity. In the case of Mandy there was a practical and constructive element to her 'craft' activity. There was an end product that was useful in her everyday life. She was not just participating in an activity for pure enjoyment it had practical considerations.

When Measor(1984) considered pupil perceptions of subject status she indicated that the pupils regarded both music and art and craft lessons as being more informal than the traditional 'academic' subjects – and behaved accordingly. They were not rated highly in the hierarchical structure of the curriculum. Music, in particular, was linked to the pupils' own informal culture and its values. This was definitely the case where the suburban girls were concerned. Whilst the girls from the rural school placed great emphasis on their personal enjoyment of music their experiences tended to be more formalized in the shape of 'extra' lessons and tuition. Music was considered to be a desirable cultural and educational bonus in their case.

As well as being viewed as a prerequisite for a 'successful' adult life, reading was seen as a much favoured activity by all of the girls – even those experiencing some learning difficulties. Comments that illustrate some of the opinions voiced included:

"I just love reading. If I get a book I just keep my head in it all day – nobody can get through to me. I just love a good book."

(Anna – High Wood School)

"It's really exciting when you sit down with it. You can't stop even though your Mums and Dads say you've got to stop reading. You don't know what's going to happen next and you have to carry on reading to see what's going to happen next."

(Judy – Whitmoor School)

The idea of reading being a pleasurable experience and a form of escapism comes over in these comments. This is emphasised more by the type of book the girls preferred to read –

the vast majority indicated their preference for ghost, horror, mystery or adventure stories. One or two indicated that they enjoyed animal stories. Reading was not just viewed as an academic necessity but a very enjoyable pastime.

These girls very much related to, and became involved in, what they were reading. This would coincide with the views expressed by Ten Dam and Volman(1991) who indicate that the feminine way of reading is to enter into a relationship with the text whereas the male approach is to remain detached from what is happening in the text. They conclude that this feminine approach to reading should not be seen negatively and more attention should be paid towards it rather than making the girls adapt to a masculine way of learning.

Stables et al(1995) indicate that girls generally have a much more positive attitude than boys towards English and also have a greater interest in reading. They are also likely to see reading as the 'essence' of English.

The mothers, particularly of the more academically able girls, acknowledged their daughters' love of reading and in many instances actively encouraged this. The enjoyment of reading was viewed in a very positive light and the 'reading ability' of individual girls was an obvious source of pride where the mothers were concerned. This was shown in the following comments:

"She reads a lot. She likes classics as well. She likes Jane Austen and she will tell you all about Jane Austen."

(Anna's mother – High Wood School)

"She reads loads of books – she'll read the whole one in a night and then she's on to the next one. She was watching something on the television and she said she didn't enjoy it because they weren't like they were in her head in the book."

(Louisa's mother – Whitemoor School)

"She reads. She loves poems. She likes murder books and Catherine Cookson. I used to

read 'em when I was with me husband but I don't no more."

(Suzie's mother – Westfield Acre School)

To an extent the comments from Anna's mother and Suzie's mother were indicative of a difference in attitude towards appropriate reading materials for their daughters from mothers from very different educational and social backgrounds. Anna's mother stressed the 'classics' and Suzie's mother felt that as Suzie was such a good reader she should read 'adult' books that she herself read. She didn't seem to question the appropriateness of the content of this material for an eleven year old girl.

St. John-Brooks(1983) looks at the idea that the background of pupils can affect their progress and attitudes in terms of English as a curriculum subject. She indicates that the different experiences the pupils bring to school can play a role in their achievements – both the experiences and achievements tend to be divided along social class lines. Each family indirectly transmits a certain cultural capital and in many instances working – class pupils lack what is seen by the school as 'appropriate cultural capital'. Progress is easier for those who possess this. From this point of view, St. John-Brooks(1983) concludes that teachers need to develop techniques for bridging cultural gaps.

A subject that was highly rated in terms of enjoyment by the suburban girls was I.T. (Information Technology). The pupils in the rural school were rather non-committal concerning this subject and did not express a great deal of enthusiasm for it. This could more than likely be explained by differential I.T. facilities within the schools. The suburban schools both had well-equipped I.T. rooms with a wide array of software that was readily available for the pupils' use – these two schools were much larger than the rural school, therefore finance was more likely to be available to provide these facilities. The rural school did not have an I.T. room – one or two computers were available for use in each classroom and there was a very limited selection of software. The pupils in the suburban schools used the computer in a greater variety of lessons and experienced a wider range of software.

### **Aspects of schooling that give rise to concerns for the girls.**

Maths was often spoken of as being a 'difficult' subject and aspects of it caused the girls concern. The concerns of the High Wood School girls included:

"Sometimes I can't work out things and I can't ask my friends sometimes cos it's like a test."

(Kathy – High Wood School)

"I sometimes find maths a bit difficult. Well when we've got really big numbers and we've got to take away and they're all noughts it's really hard."

(Anna – High Wood School)

"I struggle with maths. I go to this woman who helps me. Times tables I get worried about and dividing."

(Ellie – High Wood School)

Their concerns involved specific mathematical processes eg.dividing and subtraction, rather than mathematics in general. Further worries revolved around participating in tests. Ellie's feeling about mathematics being problematic for her was reinforced by the fact that she had to have 'extra' mathematics tuition outside school to assist her progress.

The girls from Whitemoor School voiced similar worries involving mathematics particularly the 'testing' issue – however their main concerns centred around being 'ability set' for a significant proportion of their mathematics lessons. The issue of 'sets' was a re-occurring theme. This was illustrated by the following comments:

"I don't look forward to when we're having tests. I'm in bottom set maths so when we have a test it's really hard for us and that's why I don't like them."

(Val – Whitemoor School)

"In set maths you have to do fractions. I'm in top set and I've got Mrs. Wheeler and there's some things I don't understand and I can't tell her cos I'm scared."

(Vicky – Whitemoor School)

“I don’t really like sets cos you get split up and....we only have Wednesday and Friday when we don’t go into sets. You get all mixed up with children from the other classes.”

(Toni – Whitemoor School)

The main worries were focussed on the pressures the girls experienced connected to their relative abilities – the girls in ‘top’ set felt under pressure to perform well and didn’t want to be seen to do otherwise. In contrast Val, in the ‘bottom’ set, was obviously aware of her ‘designated’ lack of ability compared to others in her year and this caused her worries when faced with tests. The idea of being taught away from the class group also seemed to cause added pressures when ‘mixed’ with children from other classes. These circumstances did not arise with the girls from High Wood School as they were taught in ability groups within their own class – they did not voice any concerns about this particular arrangement.

The worries expressed by the girls raise several issues that already affect, or may affect, in the future, their attitudes towards mathematics. Even some of the very able girls expressed some misgivings about the subject. The issue of confidence is explored by Jones and Smart(1995) and they indicate that this is one of the major factors affecting girls’ levels of participation in mathematics. They feel that because of a lack of confidence many girls opt out of continuing with studying mathematics and therefore exclude themselves from many career opportunities. However, this may well be just one of many complex factors that affect this issue and so some of these other criteria are now briefly explored.

Very much linked to confidence is the concept of ‘mathematics anxiety’. This is researched by Newstead(1998) and is particularly relevant to the girls at the centre of this research as Newstead’s work is centred around 9-11 year olds in primary schools. One of the worrying findings is that ‘mathematics anxiety’ may begin at an early age. An important factor that is emphasised is that ‘mathematics anxiety’ takes different forms – some pupils may be anxious in all mathematics related circumstances but, more

commonly, the anxiety is situation or circumstance specific. This would appear to be the case with the girls from High Wood School, Whitemoor School and Westfield Acre School. Newstead(1998) indicates that pupils exposed to ‘traditional’ approaches in the teaching of mathematics are likely to exhibit more anxiety particularly in social and public aspects of doing mathematics eg. explaining an answer to a teacher or other class members. In this particular research a number of pupils expressed concerns about tables tests and S.A.T.’s – both of these, to some degree, involve a ‘public showing’ of relative ability. Newstead’s research highlights the significance of the teaching approach to alleviate pupils’ anxieties.

Boaler(1994, 1997a) concentrates on the effect of different teaching approaches and the design of the mathematics curriculum in schools. She particularly considers how they can have a detrimental effect on girls and their achievements and concludes that a ‘traditional’ approach may cause underachievement and disaffection in girls. In order to accommodate the girls’ style of learning Boaler advocates a process based approach with the emphasis on open work with discussion and the main aim being understanding – not speed and completion of a set of tasks.

In both Whitemoor School and Westfield Acre School the pupils were taught mathematics in ability sets – however some areas of the subject were taught as class topics at Whitemoor School. At High Wood School mathematics was taught in class in ability groups. The issue of being taught in sets was frequently a cause for concern for the girls at Whitemoor and Westfield Acre – regardless of ability.

Concerns involving the teaching of mathematics in sets in secondary education are voiced by Boaler(1997b) – often the same worries expressed by the girls at Whitemoor and Westfield Acre Schools in the primary sector of education. Boaler indicates that frequently girls in the top sets respond badly to the pressure and competition of setted lessons. This was not so obvious from the girls interviewed in this research but they voiced concerns about maintaining their places in the top set – already some signs of



pressure to perform well were becoming evident in these more able girls. However, they had not yet become disillusioned and demotivated. Less able pupils in lower sets or groups also voiced concern about their ability to perform in tests and S.A.T.'s. They were obviously aware of their lesser abilities compared to their peers. This too could have a detrimental effect on their motivation and achievement. Boaler(1997b) found that secondary age pupils in lower sets became disaffected and demotivated because of the limits placed on their achievements because of their placing in a lower set ie. at G.C.S.E. they were only able to gain lower grade certificates – they were not entered for examinations enabling them to gain a 'Grade A' or 'Grade B'.

Although some aspects of English were frequently mentioned as presenting few difficulties for the girls others were indicated as giving rise to concerns – the nature of which were different for the girls from the suburban schools compared to the rural school. Only two girls from High Wood School raised concerns and these included:

“....have to do a lot of writing and I'm not very good at writing. Sometimes you don't have much time to do your work and get your writing done.”

(Sally – High Wood School)

“.....because my handwriting's terrible – for the S.A.T.'s you've got to have really good handwriting.”

“All these adjectives and pronouns – it's confusing all these different names.”

(Linda – High Wood School)

Sally, who did not find written work easy, found time constraints a problem and was concerned about completing tasks, whereas Linda's difficulties stemmed from the more technical aspects of English lessons – parts of speech and handwriting. The latter caused Linda to worry about the effect it would have on her S.A.T.'s results. To do well in these was important to her and she was the only girl who raised the worry of performing well in S.A.T.'s tests.

More of the suburban girls than rural girls expressed concerns involving English lessons. Their main worries centred around (as in mathematics) being taught formal aspects of language work in 'ability' sets. The overriding worry involved spelling tests as illustrated by the following comments:

"My spellings in case I don't know and stuff like that – I don't really like it in case you've learnt them but you get them wrong."

(Toni – Whitemoor School)

"....cos I learn my spellings and then on the day I forget every single one of them and I get really low marks and that really disappoints me."

(Vicky – Whitemoor School)

It is interesting that the main concerns expressed by the suburban girls almost mirror those expressed concerning aspects of their mathematics teaching. This again calls into account the teaching approach that is pursued and what would be most effective with these girls.

Unlike the girls, the mothers did not raise many concerns involving their daughters and their prowess at mathematics. However a few mothers did indicate that their individual daughters did not find mathematics easy and generally had to work hard to maintain progress. In these instances the girls either received 'extra' help from one source or another or, as was the case with Judy, the teacher explained the situation to the satisfaction of her mother. None of these mothers were unduly concerned that their daughters did not find mathematics easy. This was illustrated by their comments:

"My daughter is not terribly hot at maths – but then no-one is in my family. She has extra tuition."

(Ellie's mother – High Wood School)

"She struggles with maths. Perhaps she doesn't realise she struggles with it but she comes home and we have to go down the library and get maths books to remind me. She

has to work hard at it.”

(Tracy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

“Mathswise - I have said to her you’re struggling with maths. She has more crosses than she has ticks. But I spoke to the teacher and she said we don’t want to drop her down – we want to boost her up and get her confidence – bring her up rather than put her down.”

(Judy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

In contrast more major concerns and worries were raised involving different aspects of English. The greatest concerns were voiced if an individual was not, in the eyes of her mother, making adequate progress in her reading. This was shown in the following statements:

“I never thought she’d learn to read. I thought she’d come out of school illiterate.”

(Val’s mother – Whitemoor School)

“They’d done some tests and she was virtually six months behind her chronological age in reading and even further behind in spelling. We were told she would get there but she isn’t getting there.”(Kathy’s mother –High Wood School)

These two comments show the depth of feelings the mothers had if their daughters were not succeeding in terms of their English work in school. It appeared to be accepted as normal that the girls would cope and progress relatively easily in this subject. In contrast it seemed to be assumed that mathematics was a difficult subject and that it was normal to struggle for success in it. Traditionally mathematics has been seen as a male-dominated curricular domain. Siskin(1994) reinforces this and indicates that this masculine image emanates from a variety of sources – notably that female mathematics teachers are in the minority and, on the whole, the nature of teaching mathematics can be linked to a masculine ethos. There is a linear way of approaching matters using step by step procedures and there is a great emphasis on quantitative methods – all signifying a ‘male’ approach. Pacchter(2000) also indicates that some forms of knowledge are clearly

labelled by gender – mathematics and science being perceived as masculine. Further to this these subjects are seen to occupy a dominant position within the overall curriculum.

Whilst the girls' mothers wished their daughters to be proficient in mathematics there was not the same strength of feeling and worry expressed as there was if they were not succeeding with aspects of the English curriculum. They expected the girls to be more proficient in these areas. Stables et al(1995) indicate that, despite changes in recent years, there are few indications of actual changes in pupil perspectives concerning English. The girls' mothers saw reading as the essential core of English – the girls similarly placed great significance on reading. The mothers viewed competency in English - specifically reading – as a prerequisite for future life and also it was vital in order to enable their daughters to succeed in their education generally. St. John-Brooks(1983) in her consideration of ideologies surrounding English as a curriculum subject points out that it is frequently seen as a 'service' subject for other parts of the curriculum - ie. it is vital for attainment in other subject areas. She also highlights that the teaching of English, in the eyes of the majority of the population, should incorporate what she terms as 'common sense' English – ie. basic reading and writing skills. This would appear to be the view the majority of the girls' mothers possessed. St.John-Brooks(1983) concludes that this perception has considerable influence on the teaching of English and this perspective has persisted for generations.

### **Conclusion.**

The girls' perceptions of the primary curriculum were very much linked to how they perceived the hierarchical structure of the actual curriculum. The status allocated to different subject areas was of paramount importance in determining the girls' attitudes and approaches. In turn these were open to influence from a variety of sources – including the girls' mothers, their teachers, their peers, their social background and society in general. Depending on the specific context or 'field' it was possible for the girls' perceptions to vary or change.

There were certain ideas and perceptions that were inherent where the girls were concerned. These contributed to building up some of the characteristics of a group 'habitus'. These characteristics, whilst generally present, exhibited subtle nuances of difference in the cases of some individuals. Frequently this was indicative of variations in social and familial circumstances. The 'habitus' of each individual girl reflected how she had internalised and made sense of the various influences to which she was exposed.

The curriculum subjects of mathematics and English were universally seen as the most important and therefore allocated a high status. The girls saw these as significant in enabling them to be competent in the adult world – regardless of social background. Competency in these subjects was essential to be a successful pupil – manifestations of each individual's 'habitus' were to be literate and numerate. The schools reinforced the major significance of mathematics and English by designating them 'core' subjects and allocating the greatest proportion of curriculum time to them. Notable influence also came from the girls' mothers who emphasised the importance of the 'basics' and saw the teaching of them as the major role of the primary school. These subjects were seen as the means of acquiring literacy and numeracy and therefore the means of gaining 'cultural capital' in order to succeed in life and also to succeed within the education system.

Inadequacies in the realms of mathematics and English inevitably gave rise to concerns – both from the girls and their mothers. However, here there was a difference in emphasis – the girls expressed far more worries than their mothers concerning mathematics. More often than not these centred around 'competitive' elements of the subject ie. tests and being taught in ability sets. This latter was a major issue where the girls from the suburban schools were concerned. Here the style and approach used in teaching the subject caused discomfort and insecurities for the girls. The dislike of confrontational and competitive methods of teaching appeared to be incorporated into the group 'habitus' – however one or two individuals coped more readily and did not find these aspects as disquieting as the majority of the girls. The girls' mothers wanted their daughters to be

numerate and proficient in mathematics but they did not express great strength of feeling if they were not overly successful in the subject. It seemed to be assumed by both the girls and their mothers that mathematics was a 'difficult' subject – an accepted manifestation of the girls' 'habitus' was the feeling that mathematics was not easy for girls and they would almost be expected to struggle for success in it.

The mothers expressed far greater concerns if their child was not succeeding in an aspect of English – particularly reading. It was expected as normal for girls to succeed and be proficient in this subject area. An integral part of the female 'habitus' was to associate more readily with English than mathematics – success in English being more likely to be attributed to girls than boys ie. English being seen as a 'female' subject and mathematics as a 'male' subject.

When girls were experiencing difficulties in either mathematics or English the manner in which they were helped to overcome their problems was frequently indicative of a different social background. The middle-class mothers often possessed the appropriate knowledge and 'cultural capital' to provide 'extra' help themselves or, in some cases, they financed private lessons – ie. sufficient 'economic capital' was available for them to do this. In contrast the working-class mothers felt that they frequently did not possess the appropriate knowledge or 'cultural capital' to provide adequate assistance. They expected the necessary support to come from their daughters' schools.

A subject that appeared to be an anomaly where the girls and their mothers were concerned was science. In terms of the schools and the education system it was allocated a high status but the girls and their mothers placed little emphasis on it. The girls did not enjoy it and it lacked relevance to them. Their 'habitus' gave rise to the feeling that they were unable to relate to the subject and they almost disassociated themselves from this curriculum area. Here the mothers' influence perhaps came into play as they had rather negative views concerning their own science education and mainly linked the subject with the secondary phase of education. To them it did not seem to have a place in the

primary curriculum – the aim of primary education, in their eyes, was first and foremost to enable their daughters to become literate and numerate. Expertise in science was not part of the persona of a primary school pupil. Further to this they seemed to express the opinion that an individual either showed a predilection for ‘arts’ subjects or ‘science’ subjects- the more accepted route of study being ‘arts’ subjects for girls. Here again is the idea of a subject, or subjects, being dubbed ‘male’. These feelings concerning certain curriculum areas seem to be incorporated as manifestations of the ‘group habitus’ of the majority of female pupils.

Subjects that appeared to be designated as peripheral by the girls included the humanities subjects of history, geography and R.E. These subjects were really seen as ‘extras’ to the main business of schooling which was the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills. The girls from the suburban schools did not find a great deal of relevance in these subjects at all. However, the girls from the rural school were not quite so negative and dismissive in their views of these particular subjects. These differences most probably emanated from the different social backgrounds of the girls and the influences exerted upon them by their families – specifically their mothers. The ‘habitus’ of the middle-class families incorporated the idea that aspects of these curriculum areas, although peripheral in terms of formal education, were culturally desirable – they enabled individuals to acquire significant ‘cultural capital’. It was considered apposite to pursue interests connected to these subject areas in the form of hobbies and what could be called ‘cultural recreation’ – outside of school time. This included numerous visits, outings and holidays etc. that provided these ‘extras’ beyond the school curriculum – really what could be seen as cultural enrichment activities. The working-class mothers frequently were not in a position to provide this type of ‘extra’ – mainly because of financial constraints.

Where the girls were concerned the most enjoyable activities within the curriculum revolved around art, P.E., games and music. However, these areas were allocated a low status in terms of the hierarchical structure of the curriculum and were viewed as

‘informal ‘ subjects – often also pursued in some form outside school. Here the ‘field’ or context of social class presented differences in attitude towards the approach adopted in participating in these activities. The middle-class girls tended to pursue these in a more organised way – often with adult supervision in the form of clubs, classes or lessons. These were seen as desirable cultural ‘extras’ – a way of gaining further ‘cultural capital’. In contrast the working-class girls organised these activities themselves and participated in them in a more ad hoc manner – often on their own just as a means of occupying their time. The activities were unstructured and self-generated.

Throughout their schooling the girls’ perceptions of the actual school curriculum and the significance they placed on different aspects of it were subject to influences from a variety of sources. These emanated from both their home and their school background. The views and opinions the girls possessed were the result of how they made sense of, and interpreted, the influences exerted on them.



## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **The Girls' Perceptions Of Their Own And Other Pupils' Abilities.**

#### **Introduction.**

In this chapter the girls' perceptions of their own abilities and how they perceive other pupils' abilities are investigated. The data was gained via semi-structured interviews with the individual girls and their class teachers. The girls were asked to indicate how they perceived their ability in various curricular areas. They were given a choice of five possible categories in which they could place their academic achievements – as assessed by themselves. These categories were very good, good, average, poor and extremely poor. To assist them in making their assessments average was simply defined to them as placing them in the middle range of the class in terms of ability. The girls' class teachers were also asked to assess the individual girls in the various classroom subjects using the same categories as previously indicated. It was then possible to compare the two opinions – the pupils' and the teachers'. Obviously these assessments involve subjective opinions – however the teachers made their judgements bearing in mind test results that were available to them eg. S.A.T.'s.

The first section of this chapter is a consideration of some of the factors the girls use as indicators of 'cleverness' – the girls' emphasis being placed on mathematics skills as being most significant in indicating academic ability. The next section explores issues surrounding the girls' self-esteem – particularly their academic self-esteem. The analysis concludes with a look at how personality and character are often used as criteria by teachers for judging the girls rather than their intellectual abilities. The conclusion of the chapter provides a brief summary of the main themes and issues that have emerged.

### **The Girls' Indicators of Academic Ability.**

When discussing their own, or other pupils', academic ability the girls used a number of criteria as measures of 'cleverness'. Membership of a special needs group was definitely seen as a sign that an individual was experiencing difficulties with academic work. This was particularly highlighted as a significant factor by the girls from the two suburban schools at the focus of this research.

Louisa said:

".....Val and Lee are in Mrs. Trent's group which means they are special needs. But because they are special needs they are getting better. Lydia (one of the other pupils in the class) goes to Mrs.Trent because she's a quarter dyslexic. Val's not really very good at sums."

(Louisa – Whitemoor School)

Tracy said:

".....They're not very good at things. They don't do the same as the class. They do different work – much easier work."

(Tracy – Whitemoor School)

It was inferred that members of the special needs group were suffering from specific problems that affected their learning capability. Also, as mentioned by Tracy, the group did different and easier work than the rest of the class – indicating that they could not cope with 'normal' class work.

Two mothers whose daughters experienced difficulties with their schoolwork were obviously aware of the problems they were having and acknowledged this. In a similar way to the views expressed by some of the other girls they saw their daughters as having specific problems that required 'special' or 'extra' help to overcome these so that they could make appropriate progress.

Mandy's mother commented:

"She didn't seem to get on with her reading. ....she wasn't up to the standard of the rest of the children. She went into Mrs. Trent's group – she helps with the reading."

(Mandy's mother – Whitemoor School)

Val's mother said:

"She has special needs – she is catching up now. Having the extra tuition she should be up level."

· (Val's mother – Whitemoor School)

These two mothers saw that as their daughters required 'special needs' help it was indicative that they were not progressing as they should in terms of their schoolwork ie. concerning academic ability they were somehow lacking.

Frequently the girls based their opinions of their abilities on how they saw themselves performing compared to their peers eg. which group they were in for mathematics or English, the 'difficulty' or 'level' of their reading book. In particular the girls from High Wood School emphasised evidence such as gaining 'grades' for playing the violin and what was perceived as 'extra' personal knowledge gained through activities pursued outside school eg. going to church, ballet classes, taking books out from the library. They saw this as important in improving their abilities. Indeed, these extra-curricular activities and practising of 'school type' activities at home were frequently mentioned by all of the more able pupils at High Wood School.

In a similar way to their daughters the mothers often used 'comparisons' to gauge their own child's ability. Where the mothers of daughters in the suburban schools were concerned one of the most obvious criteria they could use was the ability set their daughters were in for mathematics and aspects of English work. The mothers certainly attached academic status to being a member of a 'top set' and spoke of their children with pride if they were taught in a 'top set'. This was illustrated by the comment made by Toni's mother:

“Toni’s always been this paragon of virtue. She’s always been so good. She’s been in top set for this and top set for that.”

(Toni’s mother – Whitemoor School)

This issue was somewhat different for the mothers of girls at High Wood School where the pupils were taught in ability groups within their own class. They did not seem to use this to compare and assess abilities. In fact the most common way of assessing the girls’ ability was to compare them with other siblings or close members of the family – this was also used as an indicator of ability by the suburban mothers. Comments made included:

“She’s got an older step-sister that went to .....School (local grammar school). She’s at university now. I mean Louisa is even brighter than her because she’s got that extra thing where she’s interested in everything – an all-rounder.”

(Louisa’s mother – Whitemoor School)

“I used to work through things with my son and he would grasp what I was saying but Lorna doesn’t.”

(Lorna’s mother – High Wood School)

“I’d known she’d not taken to reading in the way my son did – we just accepted that they are very different.”

(Kathy’s mother – High Wood School)

One of the mothers, Kathy’s mother, expressed disquiet that she was actually unable to compare her daughter’s work with that of other children in her class. She felt that this would give her some idea of her daughter’s progress and academic standing within the class. She said:

“I’d like to see what all of the children are doing. There’s a great emphasis on not comparing which I find very unhelpful. The teachers say this is Kathy’s work isn’t it lovely – yes it is but you don’t know how it fits in really.”

(Kathy’s mother – High Wood School)

Being able to position her daughter within her own class group seemed to be, to Kathy's mother, a true measure of her ability. She would, in her view, be able to see whether or not she was making satisfactory progress.

When asked to name the most able pupil in the class the girls almost universally used mathematics as the prime indicator of 'cleverness'. This was illustrated in the following comments:

"Jane because she knows all the answers to every question. She's on the top book (refers to mathematics text book). She's the only one on the top book in the class."

(Anna – High Wood School)

"Louisa – she's done this work before so she's the cleverest. When we was in Year 4 for set maths she was in a Year 6 set."

(Val – Whitemoor School)

Mathematics was almost universally endowed with a high academic status and was frequently ranked by the pupils as a 'difficult' area of the school curriculum when compared to other subjects. Jones and Smart(1995) indicate how it is often used as an indicator of academic success. They also comment that at primary school it is considered, by other pupils, to be acceptable to be good at mathematics – whereas this may not be quite the case at secondary school.

Louisa and Jane, two of the most able girls, equated the speed at which they worked as being an indicator of ability – they finished before the others. This issue of rapidity in completing tasks is raised by Boaler(1997a) – concerning more able pupils and mathematics taught in sets and ability groups. She considers how the emphasis, from the pupil's point of view, becomes placed on finishing the task as rapidly as possible. In the 'top' groups pupils often feel pressurised – particularly girls – the important factor seems to become completion of work rather than understanding. Boaler(1997a) feels that this may well have a detrimental effect on the pupils' education, especially girls, who feel happier if the emphasis is on the understanding of the task at hand. Brighter pupils

obviously consider it of great significance not to get 'left behind' with their work and to 'keep up' at all costs therefore finishing rapidly is indicative, in their eyes, of high ability. As well as using prowess at mathematics to assess the other pupils' ability individual pupils used it as a yardstick to indicate their own ability. This was shown in the following comments:

"I can do most tests and teacher assessments. I've done loads of problem solving. To be honest, we're better than the other children in the class. We're supposed to be the brainy ones – better than everyone else – you can do more problem solving and control your brain and everything."

(Suzie – Westfield Acre School)

"Top. Some children – some of my friends aren't as good as me at things – and are in a different place at maths. They've learnt easier things."

(Kathy – High Wood School)

Many of the girls at the focus of this research agreed with the teachers' assessment of themselves in terms of their position in the class related to their ability. However there were one or two discrepancies where individual subject ability assessments were concerned. This was particularly the case concerning mathematics. Tracy, from Whitemoor School, provided a vivid example of this. She never placed herself below 'average' in any area except mathematics and mental arithmetic. Here she grossly underestimated her ability and assessed herself as 'poor' at mathematics and 'extremely poor' at mental arithmetic – despite being in the 'top' set for mathematics. She gave her reasons for this as:

"Because I'm not very good at my times tables."

and:

"Because we have mental arithmetic tests every Friday and I never get full marks."

(Tracy – Whitemoor School)

The basis for her opinion seemed to solely revolve around tests and ‘mental’ aspects of mathematics ie. working out answers in the head rather than writing down and showing the calculation. The mental arithmetic tests are a small part of her mathematics education but it is on their results that Tracy assessed herself. Boaler(1997b) considers the reasons why girls who are able mathematicians frequently become disaffected with the subject and exhibit anxiety – possibly leading to underachievement. She concludes that the teaching approach used in ‘top’ sets which is perceived by the girls as being dominated by speed, pressure to succeed, closed approaches and a competitive ethos is the major contributory factor in the girls’ disillusionment with the subject. The girls feel more at ease with the emphasis placed on understanding and more open work situations. The particular aspect of mathematics that Tracy focussed on may be viewed as a competitive situation involving closed procedures – hence her anxiety.

Whilst the girls mainly focussed on prowess in mathematics to indicate academic ability the mothers saw achievement in both mathematics and English as the main criteria to judge academic success. Concerns were expressed if a particular child was not achieving appropriately in these areas. As was discussed in Chapter Five these two subjects were viewed as the ‘basics’ and success in these was seen as essential at primary school – particularly success in English. When discussing their individual daughter’s academic ability the discussion usually centred around competency in mathematics and aspects of English – little mention was made of any other subjects. Typical comments included:

“Tracy’s good at literacy. She’s very interested in reading. From the first time she discovered books she liked reading. She struggles with maths.”

(Tracy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

“She’s good at English. She used to be in front of everyone else in maths in school. She really liked numbers and things.”

(Anna’s mother – High Wood School)

“She’s very good at maths. I don’t know where she gets it from. Her handwriting can be appalling. Although she’s in top group for spelling she has to think about her spelling. It’s not something that just comes naturally.”

(Toni’s mother – Whitemoor School)

In the previous chapter, Chapter Five, a detailed investigation of the girls’ perceptions of the curriculum was carried out. It was seen that certain subjects were allocated a high status and others a low status – by both the girls and their mothers. This issue very much came to the fore when the girls considered what they perceived as indicators of academic ability. Inevitably both the mothers and their daughters used performance in ‘academic’ subjects as the main criteria for assessing levels of academic attainment – in this instance mathematics and English. Measor(1984) indicates the high status, and thus great significance, attached to these two subjects – mainly because of their perceived importance in terms of their relevance to the adult world and specifically their connection to jobs or careers. It mattered to pupils that they achieved in these subjects – a view shared by the girls’ mothers. The significance of certain curriculum areas is highlighted by Reid(1984) who indicates that high status subjects possess certain characteristics that contribute to their standing – they are essential for all pupils irrespective of the nature of their academic career, they are a pre-requisite for further academic progress and in some cases – particularly mathematics – they are indicative of an outstanding student. Mathematics and English appear, in the eyes of both the girls and their mothers, to possess these qualities.

Pacchter(2000) explores the relationship between power, gender and the curriculum. She indicates that certain areas of knowledge are perceived as being more powerful – mathematics being seen as one of the most powerful subject areas. Also some forms of knowledge are clearly labelled by gender and those that are perceived as masculine are usually the more powerful – mathematics falling into this category. Further to this certain assumptions about the nature of teaching and learning are linked to mathematics.



Siskin(1994) highlights that the general approach to the teaching of the subject can be perceived as incorporating a more 'masculine way of thinking' – involving a linear way of approaching issues using step by step procedures. These do not always appear to rest as easily with girls as boys. Walden and Walkerdine(1985) focus on how girls' achievements in mathematics are frequently underestimated, or even dismissed, by their teachers. This is very much linked to what the teacher considers to be the cause of the attainment. Girls can be successful in terms of mathematics attainment but remain relatively powerless in terms of the teacher's judgement of performance. Teachers' criteria for achievement in mathematics appear to include indications of challenging rules and risk-taking. These are understood to be indicative of real understanding and are largely those used to describe masculinity. This raises problems for many girls as the characteristics of femininity they display lead teachers to assume they have a lack of understanding. Walkerdine(1988) indicates that teachers often go to great lengths to demonstrate that boys have 'real' understanding whereas girls who achieve well in mathematics are frequently viewed as gaining the right result but in the wrong way. The girls' achievements appear to be denigrated because they have been gained by hard work rather than 'brilliance'.

Walkerdine(1988) also explores pedagogic practices in the teaching of mathematics and considers how children learn mathematical concepts both in school and outside school. She considers the differences between mathematics learnt in the home and 'real' world and mathematics taught and learnt in school. Mathematics in school tends to be separated from the mathematics required in everyday life. It has its own specialised language and problems posed are frequently divorced from 'real life' mathematics. The emphasis is on the rational and logical approach – the mathematics being theoretical rather than practically based. Even if some mathematics is approached in a practical manner it often does not truly link with the real life practical situation – eg. in a shopping scenario the prices may be totally unrealistic compared to reality. The emphasis is on the logical

solving of a problem – the theoretical context. The ‘normal’ is extrapolated to become theoretical. This emphasis on the use of rational thought rather than equating with the real world situation emphasises the ‘differentness’ of mathematics and adds to its ‘mystique’ - hence perhaps the view that it is a difficult subject. Anyone succeeding in it has therefore exhibited high academic prowess.

When assessing their own and other pupils’ abilities the girls used a number of factors to assist them but the subject that assumed most significance was mathematics. Sometimes it was the sole criterion they used to signify someone who possessed academic ability. Where some individuals were concerned this could have had a detrimental effect on their own academic self-image – particularly where the more able girls were concerned.

### **The Girls’ Academic Self-esteem.**

Generally all of the girls interviewed saw girls in a positive light in terms of their academic ability and virtually without exception indicated that the most able pupil in their own class was a girl. These predictions coincided with the views expressed by the class teachers concerning the pupils who were the most academically able in the individual classes.

When indicating whom they saw as being amongst the least able in their classes the girls’ views again were very consistent with those expressed by the teachers. However if they, as individuals, fell into the ‘less able’ category they did not include themselves in the group or indicate that they were struggling in terms of academic work. The girls from High Wood School all, without exception, named a boy, or boys, as being the least able in their class. Only Ellie included a girl as one of the pupils she named as least able. She said:

“I don’t think Sally is very clever because she’s always asking me and Linda what the answer is. But Sally hasn’t got a problem at all – she doesn’t use her brain very well.”

(Ellie – High Wood School)

Ellie did not see Sally's lack of academic ability as being the result of her actually having a problem and her being genuinely less able. She intimated that potentially she felt that Sally was capable of coping with her work better – it was possible for Sally to do something about it. She did not suffer from a 'permanent' lack of ability.

The girls from Whitemoor School more frequently mentioned a girl as being amongst the less able in their class but, in a similar way to Ellie, they were reticent to describe them as completely lacking in ability and usually included a positive comment to counterbalance the negative opinion they had expressed. This is illustrated in the comment Louisa made about Val:

"Like she's good at talking, she's really good at cheering people up and stuff like that."

(Louisa – Whitemoor School)

In a similar way, Judy did not completely denigrate another girl in her class and indicated that she felt that she was not always lacking in ability:

"Like sometimes she can be really smart but she doesn't try enough."

(Judy – Whitemoor School)

These two comments show that the girls really did not wish to portray another girl as being totally lacking in what they perceived as appropriate skills and wherever possible they wished to highlight positive aspects of the individual. Other girls were generally seen as possessing positive attributes and abilities.

The academic prowess of the very academically able girls was obviously held in high esteem by the other girls in the class. The only derogatory comment made about one of the academically able girls was that made by Judy when she used the phrase 'big head' in connection with Louisa – but this was counterbalanced by the acknowledgement of Louisa's ability. Holding academic prowess in such high esteem could be indicative of the positive attitude the girls possessed concerning education and the value they placed on academic ability.

Stables(1990) looks at the differing attitudes of boys and girls in mixed and single-sex schools. He concludes that girls have a more positive attitude towards school and this is particularly the case for girls in mixed-sex schools. His research indicated that in mixed-sex schools there was a tendency for a greater polarisation of feelings towards certain curricular areas along gender lines and that a positive attitude towards school could be seen as a feminine trait – hence girls in mixed-sex schools may well have a noticeably more positive attitude towards school.

Three girls, one from each of the schools at the focus of this research, were indicated by their teachers as being particularly academically able. They themselves were aware of this and indicated that they too felt that they were the ‘cleverest’ in their classes. These were the comments the three of them made about themselves when asked who was the cleverest in their class:

“Me – and that’s probably what everyone else will say – brainbox Louisa.”

(Louisa – Whitemoor School)

“I think I’d be at the top because even though I’m at the same standard as the other people in English I do work faster and get my spellings right and get all the punctuation. They do it slower and get it wrong.”

(Jane – High Wood School)

“I’m the bossiest. I’ve got a loud mouth. I can organise everyone. I’m good in groups. I’m good at story writing and I’ve got some really good friends who help me along the way if I’m stuck. Yes I think I’m the best girl. I don’t find anything difficult.”

(Suzie – Westfield Acre School)

These three girls certainly did not lack confidence in their overall abilities and were willing to indicate, without hesitation, why they felt that they were so able. This was contrary to the views that Licht and Dweck(1987) express when they indicate that girls frequently underestimate their ability and chances of success. The specific comment made by Suzie also bears further mention. Walden and Walkerdine(1985) indicate that

teachers' views of ability are frequently gendered – in their case they are specifically considering this in relationship to mathematics. They state that in primary school where girls are concerned certain characteristics are viewed as important ie. being nice, kind, pretty, helpful. In contrast where boys are concerned qualities emphasising their public presence come to the fore and some aspects of challenging behaviour may be viewed as evidence of flair and 'real' understanding. The behaviour that Suzie attributed to herself was really that which would be seen positively where boys are concerned but perhaps would not be seen in such a good light for a girl. This may well have consequences in the future for Suzie where her schooling is concerned.

The mothers of these three high achieving girls were also aware that their daughters were very able. They were certainly of the opinion that they were high achievers and had a very positive view of their own individual daughters in terms of their academic ability. This was illustrated in the following comments that they made:

"I think she's always found things easy. They (the school) deal quite well with flyers. They just give them secondary work. I'm not unhappy about that really. She's well-motivated. I think she's okay."

(Jane's mother – High Wood School)

"She's a good all rounder but particularly good at problem solving. She likes to be first to finish because she's very competitive. I don't think she is weak in any area."

(Louisa's mother – Whitemoor School)

"She's brilliant – to us she is."

(Suzie's mother – Westfield Acre School)

Whilst Jane, Suzie and Louisa – agreeing with their teachers' assessments – positioned themselves at or near the 'top' of their respective classes when they compared their abilities with those of their peers, variations occurred when they assessed their ability in individual curriculum areas. The majority of Jane's self-assessments coincided with those indicated by her teachers ie. either in the 'very good' or 'good' categories. In one or two

instances she slightly underestimated her ability – when she gave reasons for her views, the listener gained the impression that she was rather critical of herself. Murphy(1991) feels that pupils' perceptions of success are very much influenced by their teachers' evaluations – a view supported by Jones and Smart(1995). According to Murphy(1991) the nature of the critical comments received by boys and girls varies and also girls take these comments more to heart. Boys tend to be criticised for aspects of their behaviour and presentation of their work, whereas girls tend to receive comment concerning the intellectual quality of their work – their behaviour and presentation generally not requiring much critical comment. Because of the different nature of the criticisms it can affect the girls' academic image. This may well have led Jane to be so critical of her work. The subject abilities that she classified as 'very good' were often justified by what was, in her eyes, obvious evidence – ie. being on a 'higher' or more difficult book than her peers, teachers actually verbally indicating the ability or 'public' evidence of her abilities eg. number of oral contributions in class, ability to play recognisable tunes on the violin.

In a similar way to Jane, Louisa was rather critical of herself – particularly in mathematics. Her opinion concerning her mathematics ability was based on the one question that she may have got 'wrong' rather than on the vast majority of her work which was correct. She equated ability with getting full marks. This ultra-critical view of her abilities may well be explained in a similar manner as to why Jane was so harsh in her assessments of herself (Murphy 1991). However, in several subject areas, Louisa indicated that her reason for lacking ability was linked to her attitude towards them ie. she found the subjects boring. This was illustrated by her following comments:

"I find it very boring. I'm normally thinking of what I'm going to do later on – like going out and playing football and stuff like that. I'd rather be out playing football than doing history."

"Geography is about boring maps and finding where things are – I'm hopeless at that."

“R.E. – I’m not very good at that. My mind’s normally off it and I find it really boring.”

(Louisa – Whitemoor School)

In terms of Licht and Dweck’s(1987) research this attitude would have been equated with the attitude expected of boys rather than girls – explanations for not achieving being attached to circumstances outside them as individuals. In this instance Louisa attributed her seeming lack of ability to the subject material – ie. it was boring. The idea of different attitudes and approaches towards schoolwork being attributed to boys and girls is an issue also raised by Walkerdine(1988). To work hard, exhibit good behaviour and produce neat, careful work are traits that are associated and expected of primary school girls – not slightly deviant behaviour and attitudes. Louisa perhaps associated concentrating and working hard with high achievement as that was what she perceived as the expected behaviour and attitude for a girl at primary school.

In contrast to Jane and Louisa, Suzie was rarely critical of herself and had great confidence in her abilities. Her teacher, Mrs. Smith, assessed her as being ‘very good’ in all aspects of mathematics and music – areas where Suzie was specifically able. These assessments coincided with Suzie’s own views. In these instances she had ‘public’ measures of her abilities ie. tests and public performances. These she used as benchmarks for her own individual assessments. Across the range of other curriculum subjects Suzie tended to overestimate her abilities and did not indicate any significant weaknesses. This may well be because compared to the other pupils within her own class she did achieve well but as the general overall ability of the whole class was quite low it had an ‘inflationary’ effect on the more able pupils’ perceived abilities. Obviously Suzie could only compare herself to her peers whereas her class teacher puts her academic performance in a wider context.

Some interesting issues arose concerning the notable number of girls who were not outstandingly academically able but undoubtedly possessed intellectual capabilities – in

terms of their teacher assessments they would have come into the middle or upper ranges of their respective classes in terms of academic ability.

Despite academic prowess being considered a desirable trait by the girls, when it came to them as individuals, they were frequently reticent to acknowledge their undoubted abilities. This is illustrated in the comments made by Judy and Vicky from Whitemoor School who realistically placed themselves near the ‘top’ of their class.

“I’m definitely not the top person but – I’m not being silly or something but I’d put myself say third to sixth. If I set my mind to something then I can do it really good.”

(Judy – Whitemoor School)

“I’m not just saying this because I think I’m good. I’d say near the top. Well me and Louisa finish our work first and I’m always the first to finish – a week ahead of everyone else – I’m always ahead.”

(Vicky – Whitemoor School)

The opening part of these two comments almost has an apologetic feel to it as though the girls are apologising for thinking they are so able. In contrast the two girls’ mothers both openly acknowledged their daughters’ abilities and did not ‘down-play’ their capabilities and achievements. However they did temper their views with a hint of realism and understanding of their individual daughter’s personality and attitude.

Judy’s mother said:

“.....she’s a bright child and she’s got good attention. She’s got confidence and that and her reading ability. I know she’s not as confident as she makes herself out to be. Some of it’s a front.”

(Judy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

Vicky’s mother commented:

“I suppose Vicky is capable of doing anything. If she put her mind to it she could be excellent at anything. She’s capable of doing whatever she decides to do. She can be very



not bothered – selective. She tries at what she wants.”

(Vicky’s mother – Whitemoor School)

Anna and Linda, from High Wood School, tended to underestimate their individual abilities when compared to the views expressed by their teachers - both of them were classed as able and well above average. Anna consistently placed herself as ‘average’ in the majority of the academic subjects. I felt that this was how she genuinely perceived her abilities and that it was not an attempt at ‘polite modesty’ because in a few areas she described her ability as ‘very good’. These happened to be areas where she saw herself as having done ‘extra work’ or received ‘extra’ help thus giving her an advantage compared to some of the other pupils.

Linda was extremely critical of her achievements and frequently seemed to highlight negative aspects of her work. If she stated something positive in terms of her abilities in a specific subject she then indicated something that she felt was lacking in her capabilities in that curriculum area. This was perhaps indicated in her comments about her ability at writing stories where both of her teachers assessed her as ‘good’ – in contrast Linda assessed her ability as ‘poor’. She said of this:

“I don’t think I’m very good at that. Mrs. Green says that I’m good at imaginative words – but thinking a whole story out it always turns out not exactly how I planned it.”

(Linda – High Wood School)

This fits in with what has previously been discussed involving more able girls with their tendencies to be rather critical of their achievements and to focus on the negative aspects of their work. Because their behaviour does not often necessitate comment any teacher comments that they receive tend to be concerning the academic quality of their work. Murphy(1991) feels that this therefore influences their perceptions of success.

Both Linda’s and Anna’s mothers presented contrasting views to their daughters and expressed confidence in their individual daughter’s abilities. In fact the opinions they appeared to express were far more positive and even disagreed with those put forward by

the girls. However, they did acknowledge, and were aware of, some of their daughters' own misgivings but they did not see these as a cause for concern. This was shown in the following comments that they made:

"I'm amazed at how well she copes with things and that she enjoys things. She has quite a good grasp and understanding of things. She's good at English. She says she's weak at maths but I don't think she is."

(Anna's mother – High Wood School)

"She's confident in her own ability so she's able to not worry about it but on occasions it has been a niggle for her – am I going to be as good as them or better. Academically I think she's quite a good all-rounder really. She's quite imaginative with her composition work. She's good at maths – she seems to pick things up quickly."

(Linda's mother – High Wood School)

In contrast to these more able girls, the girls of lesser ability, whose teacher assessments fell in the 'average' and below categories, tended to overestimate their abilities. At Whitemoor School Mandy and Val did not really have a realistic view of their overall abilities and placed themselves in the 'middle' of the class when asked to assess their capabilities. Neither of them gave specific reasons for their views. According to their class teacher they fell into the 'lower reaches' of their class in terms of their general ability.

The mothers of both Mandy and Val acknowledged that their daughters did experience difficulties with their schoolwork. They were also aware that the two girls were receiving specialised help to overcome their problems and they indicated that they thought that this was beneficial. All told they had realistic views of their daughters' abilities but did not denigrate them for their supposed 'lack of' academic prowess.

Mandy's mother said:

"She didn't seem to get on with her reading. There are some subjects she's not very good

at. She's in Mrs. G's group for help with her reading."

(Mandy's mother – Whitemoor School)

In a similar way to Val and Mandy, Rachel and Lorna, from High Wood School, tended to overestimate their abilities. This was particularly the case with Lorna who also found difficulty in articulating the reasons for her views. Her mother was also well aware of her daughter's problems with academic work but she seemed to almost 'blame' Lorna herself for her inability to cope with her schoolwork. She seemed to possess a very negative view of her daughter's achievements. This was illustrated in the following comment:

"I'm not terribly happy about Lorna's progress but that's probably partly Lorna. There are holes in her basic knowledge – she lacks confidence. She's not confident about her abilities. I don't think she's very good at anything at the moment really."

(Lorna's mother – High Wood School)

Of the less able girls at the focus of this research only Sally, from High Wood School, had a realistic view of her abilities compared to her teachers' assessments. However, she really saw herself in rather a negative light and was very self-deprecating. She did not really give reasons for her opinions but just stated her views of her abilities negatively. Examples of this were:

"I'm just not good at it."

"I can't read like really hard books."

"Can't think of any interesting ideas."

(Sally – High Wood School)

Her views seemed to convey a lack of self-belief. The subjects in which she felt that she had some ability tended to be non-academic subjects and she associated the possibility of her having some skills in them with the fact that she enjoyed these particular subjects. Her mother acknowledged her lack of self-esteem and expressed concern about this. She said about her daughter:

“She worries about her work. She does worry that she’s not achieving enough. She’s got this very low attitude of herself.”

(Sally’s mother – High Wood School)

A notable proportion of the girls had a realistic view of their academic capabilities and virtually all of the mothers had a reasonably accurate awareness of their individual child’s attainments and achievements. In this particular section I have highlighted some of the anomalies that were perhaps significant and played a notable role in the way the girls built up the image of their own academic self-esteem.

**Girls judged for personality and character rather than intellectual abilities.**

When the class teachers were asked to comment on the individual girls’ academic abilities aspects of the girls’ behaviour, personality and character seemed to form an integral part of their assessment. This was particularly noticeable where the most able girls were concerned. Mrs. Wheeler said about Louisa:

“She doesn’t take criticism very well sometimes.”

(Mrs. Wheeler – Whitemoor School)

This view was also voiced by Louisa’s mother who said:

“She doesn’t like criticism. She’s terrible. She doesn’t like to be criticised at all which can go against her in some aspects – because you’ve got to listen to criticism to get on haven’t you?”

(Louisa’s mother – Whitemoor School)

Mrs. Smith commented on Suzie:

“We had two parents complain about Suzie this morning cos of causing fights outside school.”

(Mrs. Smith – Westfield Acre School)

Suzie’s mother commented:

“She can handle herself.”

(Suzie’s mother – Westfield Acre School)

Whilst Suzie's mother appeared to agree that Suzie could be aggressive in her behaviour she did not seem to find it as unacceptable as the teaching staff at the school.

Comments about Jane included:

"Very able. Jane's attitude is that she's very able. That in the past has meant that she has been, on occasions, not very pleasant at times with her peers in that she has made it obvious to them that she is better than they are and she knows it – but she's getting better at that."

(Mr. Jones – High Wood School)

"Attitude – excellent attitude towards school, never been a problem. The best. She's mellowed an awful lot over the last few years. She stood out as being a little obnoxious. She's rubbed children up the wrong way – only this year I feel – oh she's lovely. I think she's ever so nice."

(Mrs. Green – High Wood School)

Jane's mother also voiced concerns about the nature of the attitude she would like her daughter to possess. She said:

"I would hate her to have an I'm better than you type of attitude. She went through a stage of saying I'm better than so and so in such and such subject but I'd say yes but they can run faster than you."

(Jane's mother – High Wood School)

These three girls, Louisa, Jane and Suzie, stood out academically within each of their individual classes – their teachers, their mothers, their peers and they themselves were aware of their abilities. Louisa and Jane came from supportive 'middle-class' backgrounds whereas Suzie came from difficult home circumstances that could be described as lacking or deprived in a number of ways. The mothers of the three girls raised similar issues concerning their individual daughter's attitudes and behaviour as the class teachers. Louisa and Jane's mothers were in agreement with the opinion voiced by the teachers and indicated their disapproval of their daughters' attitudes. In contrast

Suzie's mother appeared to condone her daughter's behaviour and did not really seem to think that there was anything too untoward in what she was doing. This type of behaviour was obviously viewed as acceptable by her.

In the cases of Jane and Suzie it was indicated that they have experienced, or are experiencing, some social difficulties with their peers. Suzie, on occasion, could be physically aggressive and had been involved in fights whereas Jane was academically aggressive and wished to outdo her fellow pupils in terms of schoolwork. This type of behaviour is not what is 'normally' expected of girls. Sharpe(1994) describes the characteristics of what are viewed as expected behaviours and attitudes of primary school girls – these include quietness, obedience and greater passivity than boys. These are viewed as some of the reasons why girls succeed, more so than boys, at primary school. She also raises the issue that working-class boys, in particular, tend to be rougher, noisier, untidier and less able to concentrate than girls. In Suzie's case, with the dramatically unbalanced number of boys and girls in the class, the aggressive, rough behaviour cited by Delamont(1990) was likely to predominate and may account for the type of physically aggressive behaviour displayed by Suzie. Further to this, this type of behaviour appeared to be acceptable within her home environment. In both instances the types of behaviour manifested by Jane and Suzie would be viewed as aberrant from that expected from the 'ideal' girl primary school pupil. Despite both Mr. Jones and Mrs. Green indicating that they found instances of Jane being unpleasant towards other pupils none of the girls interviewed from High Wood School highlighted this issue.

Throughout the class teachers' assessments of the individual girls, comments about behaviour and personality proliferate. At High Wood School these included the following statements about Linda:

"She was very quiet. She's gained in confidence these last twelve months."

(Mr. Jones – High Wood School)

“She’s perky. She’s a lovely girl – lovely natured. I’ve had a lovely time teaching her.”

(Mrs. Green – High Wood School)

The teachers at High Wood School made frequent references to maturity, neatness, quietness and lack of confidence. These were often echoed by the girls’ mothers as illustrated in the comment made by Ellie’s mother:

“At times she can be very quiet. If I could do one thing for Ellie I wish I could make her more confident. But she’s quite grown up in many ways. She’s very conscientious about her work.”

(Ellie’s mother – High Wood School)

At Whitemoor School the class teacher made similar comments about the girls to those made by the teachers at High Wood School. Here, however, the mothers themselves rarely alluded to issues concerning personality and behaviour in terms of their daughters’ academic progress. Comments made by Mrs. Wheeler at Whitemoor School included:

Concerning Tracy:

“Very able – unfortunately presentation lets her down but she’s very bright. Very quiet in class, gets on with her work, no problem. Lovely girl.”

(Mrs. Wheeler – Whitemoor School)

Concerning Judy:

“Lovely girl, quite able. Lacks a bit of confidence in subjects like English and maths – but with boosting she will probably do well .....very adult – extremely grown up in her attitude – the way she speaks to me. Very sensible – always giving me advice.”

(Mrs. Wheeler – Whitemoor School)

Concerning Vicky:

“A very able girl. Very conscientious. The only thing with Vicky is she tends to rush everything she does. She’s got to be the first to finish. She sometimes lets herself down because if you criticise her she pulls the most awful faces.”

(Mrs. Wheeler – Whitemoor School)

Whilst acknowledging the overall abilities of these three girls the class teacher's views emphasised personality and behavioural traits as important elements of their academic success. These included characteristics such as being no problem, quiet, sensible, grown up, conscientious and lovely – all of these epitomise what is seen as the stereotypical view of the ideal girl pupil. At the same time certain negative aspects concerning one or two of the girls were raised – in Tracy's case untidiness and where Vicky and Louisa were concerned behaviour surrounding their inability to accept criticism – neither of these being thought of as 'normal' feminine traits.

The fact that girls are expected to behave in certain ways and exhibit particular personality traits is well documented (Delamont 1990, Measor and Sikes 1992). These expectations often have a profound affect on the way teachers approach the pupils and the varying attitudes they develop towards the boys and girls in their classes. This is highlighted by Clarricoates (1987) who indicates that because of the conforming and conscientious role the girls are expected to adopt they elicit less of the teachers' attention and are expected to, more or less, get on with their work without as much individualised support as the boys received.

The significance of personality is also highlighted by Walden and Walkerdine(1985) who focus on this issue in relationship to girls and mathematics. They indicate that at primary school certain characteristics are considered important where girls are concerned and the girls themselves also feel that these traits are significant. It is felt that to be nice, kind, pretty and helpful are desirable attributes. Clever girls are valued more if they help others with their work and girls who are not so able find their value in being 'nice'. Walkerdine(1988) further emphasises the significance of certain behavioural and personality traits in relationship to the perception teachers have of girls' actual academic attainment. Whilst good behaviour such as working hard, being helpful and producing neat and careful work appear to be expected of girls they may also be used as a sign of a lack of 'real understanding'. In other words girls achieve success at primary schools but



acquire the right result in the wrong way. True evidence of 'real understanding' involves flexibility and risk taking – more readily attributable to boys.

Both Clarricoates(1987) and Sharpe(1994) agree that generally girls experience less conflict than boys at primary school and are more academically successful. However, despite this initial success, the attributes that are encouraged during the primary phase of education become negative qualities in later life – quietness, obedience, greater passivity. These are not held in such high esteem by adult society and become indicative of weakness and a lack of intellectual curiosity.

The issue of quietness was a frequently re-occurring theme. It can be interpreted in a number of different ways. An example offered was Mrs. Wheeler's comment about Val:

"She hasn't got any oomph to really..... she does not push herself. She's bone idle and gets away with blue murder cos she's very quiet and you wouldn't notice that she wasn't getting on with her work unless you were watching her."

(Mrs. Wheeler – Whitemoor School)

Here quietness is viewed as an undesirable trait as it is equated with the negative quality of laziness. In contrast quietness, in a number of instances, was found to be a perfectly acceptable facet of an individual's character. This was highlighted by the comments made concerning Sally at High Wood School. Mr. Jones said of Sally:

"She has been very quiet right the way through school.....she's a lot better now than she was – I know teachers haven't asked her anything on occasions because they know she wouldn't say anything. She would just sit there. Because she is so quiet and so unsure of herself sometimes she's afraid to have a go at something. She's frightened of making a mistake."

(Mr. Jones – High Wood School)

Mrs. Green said of Sally: "A lovely background. Child who is very nervous but she is quite animated amongst her friends. She's the middle of three. Her older sister and

younger sister are more outgoing and she's the quiet one in the middle."

(Mrs. Green – High Wood School)

Sally's mother expressed very similar views to her daughter's teachers. She said:

"I was concerned about her because of the three of them (her daughters) she's very quiet and reserved. The other two are complete extroverts. It's difficult to believe they're sisters really. She's very quiet and takes things quite seriously. I think it's a confidence problem more than anything else. I think it's a complete lack of some self-esteem really. Mr. Jones tends to know Sally very well and doesn't put her in situations that are going to embarrass her."

(Sally's mother – High Wood School)

Both of Sally's teachers mention her quietness and lack of oral participation in lessons. This did not seem to be seen as a lack of ability or indicative of her not understanding her school work – despite it being indicated that Sally's academic performance was below average compared to the other pupils in her class. Her extreme quietness was found to be an acceptable trait which was, to a certain extent, encouraged in that the staff sometimes did not ask her questions because they felt that she would not say anything in response. This state of affairs was found to be perfectly acceptable by Sally's mother who was grateful that her daughter was not 'embarrassed' at school.

Stanworth(1984) explores the issues surrounding girls who are reticent to contribute during lessons and how this can lead to them being marginalized and virtually ignored. She indicates that the teachers' reluctance to involve such pupils in order to spare their discomfort is not helpful to the individual concerned. It undermines their confidence even further and certainly does not aid their development – either intellectually or personally.

Having discussed how the teachers frequently use behaviour, character and personality traits to judge girls it is interesting to note that the girls themselves often used similar criteria when they were assessing other pupils – particularly when they were commenting on the boys in their class. This was indicated in the following statements:

“.....like they’re always left behind in their work and stuff.”

(Sally – High Wood School)

“Robin he’s not very clever. He’s quite dumb. He’s never listening to anything. He’s always miles behind and that.”

(Linda – High Wood School)

“Well he’s not very well behaved. He does most things wrong and he hasn’t got very good handwriting.”

(Kathy – High Wood School)

“.....Luke cos of his special needs and that. Like he can’t control himself to do his work. He has to make someone laugh or something. But he’s fun to play with – I’m not just saying that cos he’s special needs. He’s really nice but he’s the least cleverest.”

(Suzie – Westfield Acre School)

“Every day Lee has not got one piece of work finished. For three months there’s not one piece of work finished. He always backchats. He’s always down at Mr. Milton’s (headteacher). About three times he ran off home.”

(Vicky – Whitemoor School)

These comments show that the girls viewed keeping up to date with work (conscientiousness) and having neat handwriting (tidiness) as indicators of a successful pupil. Neat handwriting was cited as a pertinent measure of success far more frequently by the girls from High Wood School than the other two schools.

Suzie equated a particular boy’s low academic ability with his poor behaviour – possibly because he was disruptive in class and not settling to his work. However she did express some sympathy for him and his lack of ability and indicated that he had redeeming features in that he was ‘fun to play with’. Vicky also felt that a contributory factor in one boy’s lack of academic success was his poor behaviour. His lack of self-discipline was considered to be beyond the bounds of acceptability.

The boys indicated as being less able did not fit in with the accepted image of the 'good' pupil in the eyes of the girls – ie. they were untidy, not hardworking and the nature of their behaviour was open to question. These do not coincide with the traits and attitudes expected for female pupils (Delamont 1990, Measor and Sikes 1992) and so the girls at the focus of this research viewed it as aberrant behaviour and therefore indicative of low academic achievement.

It can be seen that the teachers frequently incorporated opinions concerning behaviour, character and personality traits when assessing the individual girls' academic achievements. These views were often echoed by the girls' mothers and the girls themselves also used these factors when they expressed views about other pupils' abilities.

### **Conclusion.**

In terms of how they perceived their own and others' abilities the girls used a number of criteria but the most dominant factor was prowess at mathematics. Within the fields or contexts of home and school certain curriculum subjects, notably mathematics and English, were endowed with a high academic status. Achievement in these subjects was perceived as essential by both the girls and their mothers – thus these subjects were viewed as indicators of academic ability. Being accomplished in these areas was an essential manifestation of the group 'habitus' of female pupils – from the perspective of the girls themselves and also their mothers.

The girls placed the most significance on mathematics – part of their individual and group 'habitus' was the overriding feeling that this subject area was 'difficult'. Perhaps this emanated from the actual nature of mathematics which seemed to manifest itself in what could be described as a masculine manner – focussing on theoretical contexts, rationality, quantitative methods and a linear way of approaching issues. Mastery of this subject was therefore taken as exhibiting high academic prowess because it was not seen

as an area in which girls naturally excelled or with which they were normally aligned in terms of their gender.

Again, within the fields or contexts of both the home and the school, certain behaviours and personality traits were expected of the girls in their approach towards schoolwork and education in general. These included working hard, being quiet, generally behaving in a decorous manner, being neat and on the whole not drawing undue attention to themselves as individuals. Indeed many of these qualities were indicated as being desirable for success by the girls themselves and were used as reasons for other pupils not achieving in school. These behaviours could be said to be typically feminine traits and were engendered into both the individual 'habitus' and the group 'habitus' of the girls. They were reinforced by both the girls' teachers and their mothers. Whilst adhering to these codes of behaviour the girls are deemed as successful at their primary schools but there is a cumulative undesirable effect. Because their attitudes and general behaviour elicit few, or no, comments teacher criticism becomes directed to the academic content of a girl's work. Whilst the majority of these comments may well be helpful and constructive, overall, they could have an undermining influence concerning a girl's self-esteem – particularly her academic self-image. This can lead to individuals underestimating their true abilities and also being ultra-critical of their own work.

An interesting issue was that the three most able girls, one from each of the schools at the focus of this research, all exhibited some 'male' traits in their approach to school work – these included academic aggression, in one case physical aggression, the necessity of working speedily and the ability to cope with a competitive atmosphere. These three most able girls manifested variations from the girls' group 'habitus' by taking on board a more masculine approach towards their work. However, at the same time, two of these girls who were from middle-class backgrounds were also extremely critical of their work – even though it was blatantly obvious that they were extremely high achievers. This was not the case with the working-class girl who was a very high achiever.

The girls who seemed most affected by the 'double bind' imposed by the expected behaviours and the resulting teacher approaches to their work were the middle-class girls who were very able. The 'middle-class habitus' engendered achievement and academic success. The girls were expected to succeed in terms of their schooling and this perhaps was a contributory factor as to how they perceived their individual achievements and why they reacted as they did to criticisms of their work. They took to heart criticisms – albeit constructive – and at the same time constantly compared themselves to the most able pupil in their class. This resulted in them focusing on their mistakes rather than the work that was correct. Also they always saw themselves as academically lacking because they aspired to the achievements of the most able pupil. The end result was that they exhibited some anxieties and also, more often than the other pupils, underestimated their abilities.

The pupils who were most likely to overestimate their academic achievements were the least able. These pupils, whilst being able to acknowledge academically talented members of their class, were unable to place their own academic achievements within a realistic context. Most of the girls within this category received 'extra' help or support within their schools. In some instances they went out of the normal class situation and were taught within small special groups. They did not construe this as a sign that they were academically deficient in any way. One can only assume that the individualised help and support was instrumental in them having such positive academic self-images and that this was further enhanced by them failing to compare themselves to the most able pupils.

Whilst not wishing to indicate that a girl's schooling is totally angst-ridden, it should be borne in mind that the very nature of her gender does play a definite role in terms of her academic self-image. This in turn may strongly influence future academic decisions and the level to which the individual's education is pursued.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **The Part Played By Home And School Relationships In The Education Process.**

#### **Them and Us?**

This chapter considers the relationships the girls' mothers had with their daughters' schools. In the present political climate much emphasis is placed on the positive contribution parents – particularly mothers – can make to their child's education. This implies that a close working relationship should exist between home and school – education being a two way process. How close and constructive this relationship is may be called into question in that the extent of parental involvement is to a great degree established by the boundaries and initiatives set up by individual schools.

Martin and Vincent(1999) explore the issue of parental involvement with schools. They identify three possible types of relationship that may exist between a school and the parents – 'consumer accountability', 'active volunteerism' and 'tutelage'. In the first instance the emphasis is placed on the school being accountable to parents for their child's learning and a formal system of monitoring progress in terms of targets is emphasised – keeping parents informed of achievements, or otherwise. The parents just receive information and have limited scope for an active role in the matter.

'Active volunteerism' involves parents being encouraged to play an active part in school life by volunteering for activities such as P.T.A. committees, school governors or unpaid volunteer help in the classroom – these roles are strictly limited and only open to a minority of parents. The school limits the scope of the role and the numbers involved.

'Tutelage' is the school offering 'training' to enable parents to support their child's education. This includes activities such as evenings where aspects of the curriculum are explained so that parents can offer appropriate assistance to their child. The parents

receive knowledge and information to enable them to be 'better' parents in terms of their child's education.

All three relationships identified have limited possibilities and do not readily involve any scope for criticism or questioning of educational procedures within the schools. The three schools that the girls at the focus of this research attended perhaps involved a composite of the three parental relationships identified by Martin and Vincent(1999).

Vincent(1996) also considers the type of parental interaction the parents have with their child's school. She identifies four main types – supportive parents, detached parents, independent parents and irresponsible parents. Supportive parents accept the school's view of what is an appropriate way for parents to behave and generally attend school events and functions. They are prepared to offer some assistance with work sent home. Detached parents have little contact with the school and see the role of the school as being primarily to educate their children – they do not feel it is their role and they feel that they themselves are not fitted to play the role of educators. Home and school are two separate arenas. Independent parents tend to have limited contact with the schools and often make alternative arrangements to assist their child's education ie. extra-curricular lessons, private tuition, working with the child themselves at home. These arrangements are often made without referring to the school or class teacher. The final group Vincent(1996) identifies are called irresponsible parents. They are totally non-supportive and have no interest whatsoever in their child's education. None of the mothers at the focus of this research fell into this category but the other three groups were represented. In some instances the mothers did not fall clearly into one group but were a composite of two groupings.

In this chapter the mothers' relationship with their daughters' schools are considered in some detail. The first section looks at this in terms of the suburban schools – Westfield Acre School and Whitemoor School. These two schools had much in common in terms of their physical environment and the socio-economic background of the families at the



focus of this research. This is why I have chosen to consider them together in the same section. The second section investigates the home/school relationships at the rural school – High Wood School. The final section draws together any common traits and any conclusions that may be drawn.

### **The Suburban Schools.**

At Westfield Acre School and Whitemoor School some of the difficult home circumstances and family situations of the girls were frequently referred to by the teachers as having a possible effect on the individuals concerned. Their backgrounds were seen to be particularly significant to their academic progress. This was highlighted in the following comments Mrs. Smith said about Suzie:

“Very bright, willing worker, conscientious worker. Academically she’s got a lot of potential but then again it will be her social environment – whether she survives it and whether she can pull herself out of the situation she’s in. It depends which way she wants to go.”

(Mrs. Smith – Westfield Acre School)

Where Westfield Acre School was concerned Suzie’s mother gave mixed messages. She felt that the school provided a good service in terms of educating the pupils. The evidence she cited for this was:

“Cos they learn a lot. They get a lot of homework.”

(Suzie’s mother – Westfield Acre School)

Her own education had been rather limited and so the criteria she used to judge the standards of Suzie’s education appeared rather simplistic. She also saw the process of education as being the business of the school and it was not her place to interfere. This was illustrated in the following comment:

“I’d rather them (the teachers) get on with it. I think once they’re at school it’s up to them. If we interfered I don’t think they’d like that.”

(Suzie’s mother – Westfield Acre School)

The key word was 'interfere'. This implied that education was the business of the school and it was not her place to become too involved – school and home were two separate spheres. Contradicting this, to some extent, was her desire to know what her children did on a day to day basis within school. This was voiced as follows:

"I'd like him to say would you like to come in and see what they are doing. The only time you get an open day is parents' evening. You can walk around but there's no-one there then – no kids are there. The only letter we get is if they're going to have an event."

(Suzie's mother – Westfield Acre School)

Here Suzie's mother highlighted that visits to the school were organised and initiated by the school for specific events or functions. Involvement with the school was very much delineated by the school itself. Further to this a lack of personal relationship between herself and the staff was implied in that she always referred to the teachers as 'them' and the headteacher as 'him' – their names were never used.

At Whitemoor School virtually all of the mothers at the focus of this research seemed to emphasise the positive side of their relationship with the school. There was one notable exception to this and that was Mandy's mother. Throughout the conversation with her some extremely negative views concerning teachers and those perceived to be 'in authority' were expressed. Many of these emanated from Mandy's father who insisted on being present when I interviewed his wife. Whilst my dominating interest was Mandy's mother's opinion she quietly assented to her husband's views and indicated her support for them.

Comments made by Mandy's mother and father included:

"I can't get up there to the school. It's too far for me to walk. Because of being disabled I can't get up there. If there's any real problems they have to write to me."

"I had a social worker a fortnight ago. She came from the school as they found Mandy had had a lot of time off from school. If someone from school came I could explain why she doesn't want to go to school, why I can't get up there."

“A social worker just turned up on the doorstep. I was sort of stunned. I didn’t know what it was about.”

Mandy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

“You know these teachers like they tell my daughter she can’t wear short clothes. She can’t wear boots. She can’t wear earrings. Yet the teachers are sitting on the desk with earrings, short skirts. You should set really high standards. I just deplore the double standards. They may have the skirts up to their arsehole. That’s what annoys me.”

“There’s other things that come into play right about this uniform crap. We’re out of work. We’ve got no money – they’re saying you should have two uniforms. We can’t do it.”

“It’s a bit rich these authorities like – putting down these rules.”

(Mandy’s father – Whitemoor School)

“We was told it (school uniform) wasn’t compulsory. I’ve always sent her in uniform but because of the way I am I can’t always get up to do the washing so occasionally on a Monday or at the end of a week the uniform’s probably a bit grubby so I say put something decent on. But the social worker came down and said half the time she’s not in school uniform. It’s not as though I send her in bright orange.”

(Mandy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

Both Mandy’s mother and father indicated that they felt that the school showed little understanding of the problems they were experiencing. The fact that the school initiated a visit from a social worker was not seen as an attempt to be helpful but as interference and was greatly resented. They perceived the school as being in a position of authority – telling them what to do. This was particularly highlighted by the school uniform issue – great resentment was voiced concerning the teachers. Further to this it was intimated that the teachers were out of touch with the reality of the situation – they had no idea of the financial matters. It was alright for them but they had no understanding of the struggle it was for the family to manage financially. It was almost viewed as telling them how they

should bring up their children and highlighted their possible inadequacies as parents. Again with this family school was school and home was home – two separate and distinct entities with different functions.

Mrs. Wheeler, Mandy's class teacher, was obviously aware of some of the problems emanating from Mandy's home circumstances as evidenced in the following comment she made:

"She's of very low ability. She doesn't like school because she's admitted that to me. She's been away a lot which is obviously the reason why. I haven't seen anybody. I've had no contact whatsoever. They didn't come to parents' evening. I've never spoken to them at all. I've spoken to the social worker – and it's obvious to me that she's from a fairly poor background because of her clothing and general appearance."

(Mrs. Wheeler – Whitemoor School)

Another parent who virtually had no contact with the school was Val's mother. However she did not express such negative views as Mandy's mother and father – she just indicated that she felt that the school was in the business of educating her daughter and they should 'get on with it'. She obviously considered that the school was for school activities and home was for home activities – they were two separate areas of her daughter's life. Further to this she expressed little curiosity about what Val did at school and just said:

"She (Val) doesn't say much about it."

(Val's mother – Whitemoor School)

Mrs. Wheeler said about Val's parents:

"I haven't seen her parents. Possibly supportive in their own way. They haven't been near me."

(Mrs. Wheeler – Whitemoor School)

Suzie, Mandy and Val all came from working-class backgrounds. The problems experienced and the pressures exerted by family situations on the lives of working-class

girls are explored by Griffin(1985). She looks at how these affect the outlook and decisions the girls make towards the end of their school careers. Whilst these girls were not near the end of their school careers they were undoubtedly experiencing upheavals and difficulties in their home circumstances which could well affect their attitudes and how they approached their schooling. Walkerdine and Lucey(1989) look at how mothers from different social backgrounds approach their daughters' education in terms of home and school. It would seem that in many working-class households the emphasis is on the child being more self-reliant than their middle-class counterparts in order for the mother to successfully manage the home and domestic arrangements.

Where Val and Mandy were concerned the teacher indicated that parental support was either lacking or deficient in some way – notably because she had had no contact with either set of parents. The two girls were both described as being quiet and of low ability. In Val's case the teacher mainly put her lack of academic success down to laziness but in Mandy's case she was very sympathetic towards her 'poor' background and attributed her learning difficulties to this and her frequent absences. There was an indication that the non-attendance at school was possibly deliberate to avoid certain lessons and not due to illness or other valid reasons. This perhaps indicated that, in Mandy's case, her parents colluded in her truancy from school – it raised the question as to the relative significance her parents placed on her education. It further gives rise to the issue of the parents being aware that their daughter was experiencing some problems and distress over a certain aspect of her schooling but they have not attempted to deal with the problem – or did so in a passive way by condoning her staying at home from school.

Both Val's and Mandy's parents' lack of contact with the school was viewed as a deficiency on their parts. Both Lareau(1987) and Vincent(1986) indicate that frequently working-class parents feel intimidated by schools and the teachers in the schools – the parents sometimes indicating that they felt unable to communicate with the teachers because of them perceiving a social gulf between themselves and the teachers. This could

well have been the case with these two sets of parents. Further to this Ribbens(1993) suggests that working-class parents are more likely to see the home and school as separate entities and therefore feel it is not appropriate for them to have a great deal of contact with the school. Education is seen as the business of the school and teachers and home and home life is something to keep separate.

Cortazzi(1991), when considering the problems teachers experience with parents, indicates that where working-class areas are concerned the emphasis is on social problems rather than academic problems. He also points out that parental pressure in terms of schooling is generally lower – as are the parents’ expectations for their child. This inevitably affects the approach the teacher adopts towards the individual pupils. He seems to feel that teachers in working-class areas almost expect a lack of parental backing and support.

The mothers so far discussed had all received the minimum education that was legally acceptable and had left school at the first available opportunity. None of them had gained any educational qualifications at all. For the period of time that they were engaged in employment they carried out low paid, unskilled work. Mandy’s and Suzie’s mothers both indicated that they did not have an easy or comfortable relationship with the respective schools and felt that contact was not encouraged. Connell et al (1982) raise the issue that working-class parents may almost be frozen out by the teachers. The rationale behind this is that the middle-class teachers may be less comfortable with these parents and therefore not so at ease as with the middle-class parents.

Vincent(1996) indicates that the converse may also be true in that some working-class parents are uncomfortable in their dealings with their children’s schools because of their own personal dislike of school. In other words there may well be tensions, in terms of both some teachers and some working-class parents, which contribute to a less than constructive relationship. Vincent(1996) also posits the idea that in some instances working-class parents see their child’s school as part of the external power structure that

is attempting to manage their lives. These particular parents view this as being intrusive and see it as a criticism of their parenting ability. This issue was highlighted by Mandy's parents – however it was not particularly manifested by other working-class parents at the focus of this research.

The academic aspect of their daughters' schooling was seen as being the business of the school and it was emphasised that the teachers were responsible for this and these three mothers, particularly Val's mother, sought little information concerning this. Their main criticism of the respective schools revolved around non-academic matters and they only felt it was appropriate to communicate with the school when there were extenuating circumstances. Lareau (1989) calls this phenomenon of keeping home and school issues as two distinct entities 'separation'. She indicates that this is particularly prevalent in working-class families. With the families of Suzie, Mandy and Val this certainly appeared to be the case.

As a complete contrast to the mothers of Mandy and Val, Vicky's mother perhaps had the most contact with the school – volunteer classroom helper, member of the parents' fundraising association, helper at various school functions such as discos, P.T.A. events and sports' days. Her comments about the school and her own involvement included:

"It's a family atmosphere here. He's (the headteacher) very approachable. It helps all the children settle down as they come in."

"Most of the staff are very quick to pick up any problems. We're working together – you can't play one off against the other."

"The children know who I am anyway – and the staff. I'm very involved with the Junior School. If I had any more contact I'd be moving my bed in here. I've been amazed how few come in. The turnout for meetings is diabolical. Same select few always the ones that are there."

(Vicky's mother – Whitemoor School)

She emphasised that she felt that the school was working with the parents and kept them informed of any problems. Vicky's mother certainly did not feel that it was a case of 'them and us' and obviously felt at ease in the school surroundings describing it as having a 'family atmosphere' and the headteacher as being 'approachable'.

She took great pride in pointing out how closely involved she, as an individual, was with the school – making her different to the majority of the parents. This was emphasised by her implied criticism of the others for not being involved. It was almost as though she was saying that she had a rather special, exclusive relationship with the school.

The converse of this was expressed by Mrs. Wheeler, the class teacher, who obviously felt that Vicky's mother's relationship with the school, in her eyes, was rather too close and intrusive. This was shown in her comment:

"Mum did come up to hear the readers. She's very keen to come into school. I wasn't so keen cos I don't quite – she's an odd sort of person – if I'm allowed to say this. She came in, did about three weeks – you know one session per week, told me that she thought the children had really improved because of what she'd been doing – kind of like bugs you because it makes you think well she doesn't think I've been doing it."

(Mrs. Wheeler – Whitemoor School)

Mrs. Wheeler indicated that she felt that the parents should perhaps maintain a certain distance in terms of their relationship with the school – the academic side of matters was the business of the teachers. To an extent here was a teacher implying a 'them and us' relationship. In this instance the boundaries of the role of parent-helper, as defined by the class teacher, had been breached. Vincent(1996) indicates that the designated role of parent-helper is a very narrow one – usually involving carrying out mundane tasks allotted by the teacher concerned. The tasks the classroom helpers are expected to do are normally to support the class teacher and enable him/her to get on with the real business of educating. These tasks often incorporate 'housekeeping' type work such as tidying and sorting out library books, perhaps mounting the children's work for display and hearing



the children read. The latter, perhaps, is the nearest a parent gets to an actual teaching situation within the school.

Vincent(1996) points out that often teachers feel uncomfortable having parents in the classroom and strive to maintain a boundary between them as ‘professionals’ and the parents as ‘lay’ helpers. In this case Vicky’s mother overstepped the mark by passing comments about issues that were the domain of the teacher ie. the professional. She was seen to have encroached in an area that was out of bounds for a ‘lay’ helper. Maybe the class teacher felt that her professionalism was being called into question.

The remaining mothers emphasised the atmosphere of the school and their comments indicated that they were not intimidated by the staff or the school environment. Their visits and contact with the school on a day to day basis were however somewhat limited as these mothers all worked during the day.

Their comments included:

“They always tell you, you are welcome to come after school if you have any problems.”

“I think that they’re the qualified teachers and they’re constantly on teacher training days to upgrade their information and I think they’re equipped to teach my children the academic things they need to know. I think I need to know what they’re learning so I can support that. I need to know if there are any problems so I can deal with them at home.”

(Tracy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

“I like the way the teachers are always open to the parents. If there’s a problem you go up there, see them and it will be sorted.”

“Well I’d like to think that she goes to school and she’s happy, she does her work and there’s no reason for me to interfere. Some parents go in for everything – any little reason.”

(Judy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

“I think the school needs an input from parents. On the other hand they are the trained

professionals – they know what they are doing. I probably leave it to them.”

(Toni’s mother – Whitemoor School)

The general feeling was that their duty was to be supportive and that the staff were trained professionals whose role was to take care of the academic side of things. To a great degree these mothers viewed it as interfering if they had to have a great deal of input in this area. Here again was the emphasis on the school covering academic issues and the home dealing with other matters. There was still almost a distinct division between the two but whilst the areas appeared to be separate they were not seen as a source of conflict.

The class teacher, Mrs. Wheeler, indicated her views of the supportiveness of the girls’ families in very simple terms. She said of Tracy’s family:

“Definitely supportive. I think it’s a one-parent situation. I’ve seen Mum a couple of times and she came to parents’ evening.”

(Mrs. Wheeler – Whitemoor School)

She said of Toni’s family:

“Very supportive. I’ve seen both Mum and Dad quite often. They came to parents’ evening and they contribute a lot and assist her.”

(Mrs. Wheeler – Whitemoor School)

The measures of supportiveness seem to be totally linked to whether or not the parents attended parents’ evening and if Mrs. Wheeler had actually met them at some point.

Basically these remaining parents were viewed by the class teacher as exhibiting ‘appropriate’ behaviour in terms of their daughters’ schooling. They were supportive of the school in that they attended parents’ evenings and school performances – these occasions for contact were those offered by the school. In terms of the class teacher these parents did not ‘intrude’ into the day to day classroom education of their children – a professional distance was maintained. Vincent(1996) describes this type of parent as ‘supportive’. They accept the school’s definition of a ‘good’ parent in terms of their

child's education and acknowledge the professional acumen of the teachers. They also indicate their own lack of professional knowledge concerning appropriate academic teaching of their child and, in their eyes, this precludes them from making negative comments concerning the school practice and curriculum issues.

In both Whitemoor School and Westfield Acre School the mothers, on the whole, kept their distance from the schools and had little day to day involvement in their daughters' education. They rarely went into the schools during the day except under exceptional circumstances – in most cases they were unavailable because they either worked or personal or family circumstances were such that they were unable to be present in the school during the working day. Generally the mothers acknowledged the professional status of the teachers and felt that the actual process of educating their daughters was the business of the members of staff. They did not feel that it was their duty to encroach on this – the teachers were trained and they were not. From this point of view the mothers had created distance between themselves and the schools. Issues that they were most likely to become involved in were social or behavioural – they rarely questioned academic matters. This may well have been due to a lack of confidence in dealing with the 'professional' teachers when many of them possessed lesser or no academic qualifications themselves.

In an extreme case the gulf between 'professional' teachers and a set of parents totally lacking in any academic qualifications was so great that there was almost a complete alienation. The teachers viewed the parents as being disinterested and totally non-supportive and conversely the parents viewed the teachers as also being non-supportive and out of touch with real life.

However in the eyes of the teachers the majority of the mothers at the focus of this research were described as supportive. They attended parents' evenings and school events such as concerts – in some ways these were really peripheral events concerning their daughters' education and schooling. There was little opportunity for 'active' involvement

in the education process itself and real decision-making concerning significant issues involving their daughters' schooling. If mothers were involved in helping in the school it was in a narrowly defined role – designated by the class teacher or the school in general ie. P.T.A. association and events, helping on school trips and hearing children read.

Very few mothers assisted during the school day and those that did carried out a limited range of tasks and were expected to behave in a certain way in terms of their relationships with the teachers. The class teachers were conscious of their professional status and, in the case of the Whitemoor School class teacher, resented what she saw as aspects of her professional expertise being questioned – particularly by someone who did not possess a specific professional teaching qualification.

At the suburban schools the mothers mainly distanced themselves from their daughters' schools. Generally they felt that in terms of education the teachers were the professionals and that that was their role. They did not feel that it was appropriate for them as parents to question aspects of their daughters' education as they themselves were not qualified to do so. They saw their role as mothers to be supportive of the school and their contact was limited to parents' evenings and school events and concerts. The class teachers preferred the mothers to play his type of 'minor' supporting role. It was not intrusive and did not encroach on their professional status.

### **The Rural School.**

The only parent who mainly focused on having a negative relationship with the school was Rachel's mother. This was perhaps emphasised more in that the family had only been back in this country for about nine months after having spent several years in Australia – comparisons were readily drawn between the Australian school Rachel had attended and High Wood School. Rachel's mother said his about High Wood School:

“We felt that the school wasn't comfortable with us taking the children into the school in the mornings and picking them up. They want us to drop them at the gate and then they walk up to school on their own. We're not happy to do that.”

“Very formal, very old-fashioned. Though I’m sure the education is excellent. I think it’s traditional – the way they’ve been brought up. This is the way it is. If you don’t like it – you leave.”

“I feel there’s a brick wall. There’s no interaction between the teachers and parents.”

“I couldn’t go and see her work without making an appointment at the end of term. I feel that I can’t go and find out what my children are doing in school.”

“When there have been little problems in the past I’ve been able to iron them out straight away. It’s totally open in Australia. They have a very different approach to school in Australia. It’s very much – if you’ve got a problem come in now, don’t make an appointment.”

“I asked – I used to hear reading in Australia – he (the headteacher) said if there are any vacancies. It was like applying for a job.”

“I want to be involved in my children’s education. I want to see that they’re learning and how they are taught. Not to interfere but to support the teachers.”

(Rachel’s mother – High Wood School)

Rachel’s mother very much emphasised the gulf that she felt there was between home and the school. In this instance the separation was instigated by the school itself – in Rachel’s mother’s eyes. She cited High Wood School’s discouragement of parents actually physically entering the school building ie. leaving and meeting children at the school gate, only having limited access (by appointment) to view their child’s work at the end of term. Any conversations with the teachers were on a formal basis and appointments had to be made. Rachel’s mother felt that High Wood School had a rather stiff, formal relationship with the parents in contrast to the school her daughter had attended in Australia. In her eyes the school viewed the teacher/parent relationship as them/us.

In an effort to bridge the gap she volunteered to go into the school to hear children read – this was also rebuffed. The school, in the form of the headteacher in this instance, limited

and vetted the parents who were allowed in to the school. The relationship between a school and parents that has parents volunteering to help with various school activities is described Martin and Vincent(1999) as 'active volunteerism'. However they emphasise its limited role as only relatively few parents are actually involved. This would appear to be the case at High Wood School – not every parent was permitted to participate.

Despite Rachel's mother's desire for more contact with the school and a greater say in her daughter's education her efforts to have a closer alliance with the school were viewed in a negative way. The class teachers said of Rachel's mother:

"The impression I got with initial meetings with Mum is that she's very keen to push her on. I think that may be putting pressure on her. When I talk to Mum it's usually about negative things."

(Mr. Jones – High Wood School)

"I'd say they (Rachel's parents) are supportive. They're giving her support but in the wrong sort of ways. It's not developing her – it's pushing her into things. Pushy is the wrong sort of support."

(Mrs. Green – High Wood School)

It was obviously felt that the ground rules for relationships between the home and school should be initiated and delineated by the school – in the eyes of the teachers. An individual who had their own ideas about the type of interaction that was appropriate was viewed as interfering with the due process of the school. Cortazzi(1991) considers aspects of parental involvement and how sometimes it leads to a parent being described as 'awkward' by a teacher. He indicates that this is particularly the case in middle-class areas where there is perhaps a greater expectation for the child to perform well and so there is a tendency for parents to become over-involved in their child's schooling.

Another mother who expressed a desire to be more involved with her daughter's

schoolwork was Kathy's mother. She said:

"I'm here. I'm not actually out working. I could organise things so I could give her so much time. The effort is coming from home – it would be better if it was teamwork. They provided the material and I made the effort here. To do some writing together – it's so enjoyable."

(Kathy's mother – High Wood School)

Both Rachel's mother and Kathy's mother expressed this wish to play an active supportive role in their daughters' schooling. They did not view this as interfering but obviously felt that educational activities should involve home life as well as school life – there should be some overlap and home and school should not be seen as two totally separate areas. Lareau(1989) points out that middle-class parents do, on the whole, see more overlap between home and school activities than working-class parents. She also indicates that middle-class parents are more likely to participate in educational activities at home and wish to be involved in their child's school work at home.

Kathy's mother had also expressed some disquiet about problems her daughter was experiencing with her English work and wished to try and offer her some extra support and help. Her worries and concerns were almost summarily dismissed by both of her teachers. This is what they commented:

"Spelling is her weakness – reading as well. Mum is concerned that she's been to see me and Mrs. Green a few times this term – talking about dyslexia and that sort of thing. I don't think she's got much of a problem but she has a weakness in that area but Mum is concerned about it. They all drop their jargon."

(Mr. Jones – High Wood School)

"She does have problems in certain areas – in written English. I didn't expect them but I actually think the Mum is possibly making more of them. I don't think Kathy is over-concerned."

(Mrs. Green – High Wood School)

The staff gave the impression that they felt that the mother was being rather fussy and possibly interfering in what they saw as their professional judgements.

Whilst not commenting as forcefully as Rachel's mother about feeling distanced from the school both Kathy's mother and also Jane's mother indicated that they too were aware of a form of gulf maintained by the staff. This was illustrated in the following comments they made:

"I quite understand parents must be the bane of teachers' lives. They must be defensive because of the professional parents."

(Kathy's mother – High Wood School)

"I think it could be seen by some parents as a very distant thing. I think I would query the 'them and us' attitude of the staff. The staff seem to be very defensive if you go up with a problem. I think the staff do worry about what the parents think. I think it's sort of banded up against parental complaints."

(Jane's mother – High Wood School)

This concern about what the parents are thinking and saying about the school was voiced by Mr. Jones in his comment concerning Jane's mother:

"Jane's family are very supportive but there's a little undercurrent as well I think to make sure Jane's moving on. Mum doesn't come to me and say that. It's what I hear her saying to other people."

(Mr. Jones – High Wood School)

Both Jane's mother and Kathy's mother felt that the staff kept the parents at a distance because they were concerned and may even have felt threatened by the parents who, on the whole, were from professional backgrounds themselves. Because of the nature of the parents' backgrounds the teachers felt that they were more likely to face critical comments and have their professional expertise questioned. This view is borne out by both Lareau(1989) and Vincent(1996) who indicate that teachers sometimes feel threatened by middle-class parents and feel that their professionalism is in danger of



being questioned. As an almost protective mechanism they try to keep the parents at a distance. This would perhaps appear to be the case at High Wood School where the vast majority of parents were from middle-class professional backgrounds.

At High Wood School not all of the ‘distancing’ between staff and parents was initiated by the teachers, some was activated by the parents themselves. This was evidenced in the following comments made by some of the mothers:

“I’m not in the Parents’ Association or anything. I do go over – I’ve helped out on a couple of trips and I go over there to take the children to events at the school but I don’t get involved. I don’t really like to. I’d rather keep my distance.”

(Ellie’s mother – High Wood School)

“I’m not the sort of mother who rushes up every five minutes. I don’t want to be a constant nag. I come from a family of school teachers. I can see the other points of view too.”

(Sally’s mother – High Wood School)

“I’m a teacher and probably that’s why I stay out of the way. Unless it’s pretty major I never go anywhere near the place. When you’re in the profession I don’t think it’s fair on the staff unless it’s absolutely vital. We go to all the parents’ evenings and we go to the shows and information evenings they have. We go to everything the children are involved in but I wouldn’t be up there every second minute asking about changing reading books. Some parents do go up and ask about what I call trivia. I don’t want to threaten them in any way really as I’m quite happy.”

(Jane’s mother – High Wood School)

“.....unless you make an effort to go into the classroom – which I don’t like to – I don’t like to feel that the staff think I’m watching everything they are doing. I don’t go in and see her books as much as I should.”

Kathy’s mother – High Wood School)

To some extent, even though these mothers indicated that they voluntarily had contact with the school, they also felt the need to limit their contact. They obviously viewed the issue of their relationship with their daughters' school as being a balance they had to maintain – they felt that they had to be sensitive to the feelings of the teachers and their professional role in this instance. This factor was very much at the forefront of their thoughts. They wished to fulfil their role as supportive mothers but did not wish to overstep the mark and be seen as 'interfering'.

Despite these mothers feeling that they had to limit their contact and approaches to the school the teachers, with some reservations, felt that they were supportive of their daughters. This was illustrated in the following comments that they made:

"Mum takes an interest in both Ellie and her brother but she only seems to come and Talk when there's something negative happened. I think Mum thinks she's very supportive. She's got Ellie's best interests at heart."

(Mr. Jones – High Wood School)

"Sally's got supportive parents – very supportive. We don't see a lot of her mother but she's there when we need her. I feel as if she thinks school's important."

(Mrs. Green – High Wood School)

"Kathy comes from a family that's very supportive – a rich background of literature, music and social activities. I'd say they were very supportive. I mean she's involved in a lot of out of school activities. I think that provides a very rich general knowledge."

(Mrs. Green – High Wood School)

Ribbens(1993) raises the issue of parents feeling concerned lest they antagonise the teachers when they approach the school or participate in events at their children's school. She indicates that some mothers genuinely have worries that could have detrimental effects for their individual child and therefore they limit how assertive they are when dealing with the teachers. This issue seemed to be a factor at High Wood School. However some of the anxiety that arose seemed to centre around the fact that the mothers

themselves did not wish to be seen in a negative light by the teachers. They wished to be perceived as 'good' mothers – they were concerned about how their own role as a mother was seen by others – notably the school staff.

Sally's mother and Jane's mother both cited their 'insider knowledge' as a reason for them attempting to keep some distance between themselves and the school. This was an interesting facet as these two mothers equated themselves with the teachers in a professional capacity but at the same time used it as a reason for not becoming, in their own views, over-involved in their daughters' schooling.

Ribbens(1993) further cites the fact that a mother who also happens to be a teacher often feels that she 'has to tread a fine line' in her relationship with her daughter's own school. There is a balance to be maintained between their professional appraisal of the situation ie. how they view the school as a teacher and how they view the school as the mother of a pupil being educated there. This dual perspective may give rise to some conflicts of interest or tensions. Jane's mother, in particular, seemed to experience this problem.

Sikes(1997) considers how teachers' attitudes and perspectives towards their pupils may be affected once they themselves become parents. She indicates that often teachers who are also parents felt that they become more sympathetic, patient and sensitive in their dealings with pupils once they experienced parenthood themselves. The converse of this may well be true in that parents who are also teachers, or have close connections with teachers, may exhibit greater understanding, sensitivity and empathy with their child's own teachers. This could be that they have a greater understanding of both sides of the home/school relationship.

Linda's mother and Anna's mother were two parents who did not mention any form of 'distancing' between parents and teachers. Indeed these two mothers had particularly close connections with the school. Both of them were members of the 'Parents' Association' and also had rather individual liaisons with the school. Linda's mother was the editor of the school magazine which necessitated working closely with the teaching

staff and going into the school on numerous occasions talking to both teachers and pupils. This meant that she had a considerable amount of ‘extra’ contact with the school on a day to day basis.

Anna’s mother had very close personal connections with the school in that her own mother had actually been a teacher at the school and had only recently retired. She had actually worked alongside some of the present teaching staff – including the headteacher. Anna’s mother emphasised her close personal contacts with High Wood School:

“I’ve known the headmaster a long time because of my Mum’s contact. One of the teachers there I went to school with – Susan Green.”

(Anna’s mother – High Wood School)

She described much of her contact with members of staff as being ‘informal’ and often on a social basis.

Both of these parents played an active role at their daughters’ school – members of the ‘Parents’ Association’ and, in the case of Linda’s mother, editor of the school magazine. As Martin and Vincent(1999) point out these roles are only open to a few parents so these particular mothers were viewed very positively by the school itself and were seen as being ‘supportive’ and ‘participant’ parents – as defined by Vincent(1996). Anna’s mother was viewed somewhat differently to the majority of mothers as she was part of the same social circle as some members of staff. This inevitably led to a different type of relationship with the school as compared to the other mothers.

There was one set of parents, Lorna’s parents, who were seen in a very negative light by both Mr. Jones and Mrs. Green. They had very little contact with the school and rarely attended any of its events or functions. Mr. Jones said of Lorna and her parents:

“.....she (Lorna) gets very little support at home – Mum might tell you different. She’s (Lorna’s) totally disorganised. I think it’s because of the disorganisation at home.”

(Mr. Jones – High Wood School)

Mrs. Green said of Lorna and her parents:

“Her family is a strange combination because they’re educated parents – again the mother’s training to be a teacher. Difficult to approach – mother is distant. There’s no support at home. With educated parents and wealthy – money’s no object. Nanny to look after the children – very, very strange – neglected really.”

(Mrs. Green – High Wood School)

Lorna’s mother acknowledged her lack of contact with the school and indicated that she did not really know a great deal about what was happening there. She felt that it was up to the school itself to keep parents informed – this was really the school’s responsibility in her eyes. However, she did indicate that she was partly to blame for lacking knowledge concerning school related matters. This was illustrated in the following comment:

“Some of it is my fault because I’m not very involved in what the children do because of what I’m doing.”

(Lorna’s mother – High Wood School)

Despite this Lorna’s mother was very happy with High Wood School but acknowledged that Lorna was having some problems with her schoolwork. She did not view herself as having a particularly negative relationship with her daughter’s school but did not appear to visualise actually approaching and working with Lorna’s teachers to overcome Lorna’s educational problems. She said about Lorna’s difficulties:

“I’m not terribly happy about Lorna’s progress but that’s partly Lorna.”

“There are things I’d expect her to know but she doesn’t seem to. I used to work through things with my son and he would grasp what I was saying but Lorna doesn’t. There are big holes – I don’t know where to begin to tackle it. I’m getting her extra tuition in the New Year.”

(Lorna’s mother – High Wood School)

To a considerable extent Lorna’s mother could be described as an ‘independent’ parent in terms of her relationship with the school. This type of parent, according to

Vincent(1996), tends to have little or no contact with the school and may work with their child without referring to the class teacher. They may also arrange for the child to attend 'extra' classes or tuition, again without seeking the teacher's advice. This would appear to be the case in this instance – there is little evidence of working co-operatively with her daughter's school.

When considering the mothers at High Wood School who were the focus of this research there was evidence to suggest that a process of 'distancing' between themselves and their daughters' school took place. To a great extent this was instigated by the school itself. There were very clear parameters concerning parental involvement or even presence in the school. Occasions for 'real' participation in their daughters' education were strictly limited for the mothers. Only a very small number of them seemed to have any close face to face contact with the staff – outside school instigated meetings such as parents' evenings. In the eyes of the teachers 'good', 'supportive' mothers were those who attended school events such as concerts and parents' evenings. Any desires expressed to have more contact and more personal involvement were viewed as intrusive and the mothers were considered, by the teachers, to be 'fussy'. The teachers were very aware of and guarded their 'professional' status – they were wary of having their professionalism challenged or called into question. It is possible that the mothers' own professional and academic backgrounds caused the teachers to have anxieties and concerns. The knowledge of the mothers was such that they were able to understand and question academic and professional issues arising within the school. This perhaps gave rise to insecurities in the teaching staff and they dealt with these by keeping the parents at a distance.

In contrast many of the mothers also felt the need to keep a 'distance' between themselves and the school. They, on the whole, were very conscious of how the teachers viewed them as mothers and were at pains to ensure that they had a positive image and were not viewed as interfering. They were very aware of 'overstepping the mark' and

made efforts to maintain an amicable relationship with the teachers and the school. The mothers did not view the members of staff with great awe but saw themselves as equals. Indeed, many of them had higher, or similar, academic or professional qualifications to the teachers. This was perhaps a major contributory factor towards the nature of the parent/teacher relationship at High Wood School. The teachers were obviously concerned about having any aspects of their professionalism called into question and the mothers were concerned about the image they presented to the teachers. This resulted in a form of 'distancing' by both the members of staff and the mothers in an effort to maintain an amicable relationship.

### **Conclusion.**

The nature of the mothers' relationships with the individual primary schools were significant as they, to a notable extent, were indicative of their attitudes towards schooling and education in general. This in turn had an effect on their approach towards their individual daughters in terms of their primary education.

Within the 'field' or context of the suburban schools and the rural school there was evidence of 'distancing' on both the part of the schools and the mothers themselves – however the nature and the reasons for this appeared to vary.

The vast majority of the mothers from the rural school had a degree or a professional qualification – they had experienced some form of education or training after the age of eighteen. In contrast none of the mothers from the suburban schools possessed a degree and very few had pursued any form of education or training after the age of sixteen. Some of them had not even gained any basic qualifications at all. This appeared to be a significant factor in the nature of the home/school relationships experienced by the mothers. This advantage in terms of 'cultural capital' was also significant where 'social capital' was concerned. The social networks within which the middle-class mothers were involved tended to include people from similar professional backgrounds possessing

similar cultural interests and tastes. This appeared to affect the nature of the attitude of the school and teaching staff where these mothers were concerned.

Where the rural school, High Wood School, was involved the parents were very noticeably kept at a distance – some of the parents themselves noticed this and even made comment on the matter. There were definite times and events when it was deemed appropriate for the parents to visit the school. Further to this the mothers were physically kept at a distance – they had to leave their children at the school gate. Any contact with the teaching staff was usually via appointment only.

The teaching staff did not really encourage a great deal of parental contact and seemed very guarded in their relationship with the mothers. Any mother seeking further contact or involvement, or questioning aspects of the school's routine or curriculum, was regarded as 'interfering' or 'fussy'. The teachers were very conscious of their professional status and were aware that the parents of the pupils were mainly professional people who were well-educated. This may well have led them to feel concerns that their professionalism may be questioned and so they, either consciously or subconsciously, kept the parents at some distance – a self-protection mechanism.

In terms of 'cultural capital' and 'social capital' the middle-class mothers perceived themselves as being 'on a par' with the teachers and vice versa. This appeared to pose difficulties for the teachers as their perception of themselves as knowledgeable professionals, which was an inherent manifestation of their group 'habitus', may be open to deep scrutiny and questioning because of the social and academic standing of this particular group of parents.

On the whole, the mothers were viewed by the school as being 'supportive' (Vincent 1996) in that they were prepared to accept the school's view of their role in the education process and they attended the school initiated events and meetings. A very small proportion of mothers, the privileged few, were able to be 'participants' (Vincent 1996) in some aspects of school life but the scope of their activities was strictly limited by the staff



and the school. Being viewed as 'supportive' in terms of education and schooling was an expected manifestation of the group 'habitus' of middle-class mothers – expected by both the mothers and the teachers.

At the suburban schools, in contrast to the rural school, the idea of keeping the parents at a distance was not so marked and obvious. This may well have been due to the different social and economic circumstances of the families – the majority of the mothers were unable to go into the school during the day because of work or family commitments, therefore the issue of 'interfering' mothers was less likely to arise. The class teachers seemed less defensive concerning their professionalism being questioned and generally the emphasis was on encouraging parents to attend school designated events such as children's performances and parents' evenings. However, on the odd occasion that a mother commented on an academic or professional issue the class teacher was rather affronted – the idea coming across that the mother was not really suitably qualified to make comment.

On the whole the mothers could be viewed as not possessing the same 'cultural', 'social' and 'economic' capital as the teachers. The teachers could be seen to be 'advantaged' in these areas and therefore did not feel their professionalism or status was questioned or scrutinised to the same extent as it could be by middle-class mothers. If a working-class mother did question a professional or academic matter the teacher perceived this as wholly inappropriate as the individual was seen to be lacking in the necessary 'cultural capital' to make what, in his/her eyes, was an informed judgement.

The teachers viewed the majority of mothers as being 'supportive' (Vincent 1996) – they attended school designated events and generally accepted the schools' view as to what was a suitable role for them as mothers. Very few mothers were able to play a 'participant' role (Vincent 1996) in the school because of their work and familial commitments. The small number that did participate did so on a very limited scale – the tasks they performed were usually peripheral to the education process ie. fund raising,

tidying the library, mending books and occasionally hearing pupils read. The group 'habitus' of these mothers manifested itself in that they were supportive of their daughters in terms of their education but their support was limited in its closeness. They as individuals felt that this was appropriate and would not feel comfortable with a closer relationship. This was also the role that was perceived as appropriate by the schools and teaching staff.

One or two mothers could be described as being 'detached' (Vincent 1996). They had very little contact at all with the school – they did not deem it necessary as they viewed education as being the sole domain of the school and the teachers. The mothers who fell into this category tended to be those who possessed few, or no, academic qualifications themselves.

At High Wood School, even though the majority of 'distancing' was initiated by the school and the staff, there was evidence to suggest that a notable number of mothers also kept their distance – it was a two way process. In this instance the mothers were concerned that they were seen in a positive light by the teachers and were not seen to be interfering or fussy. This was particularly the case for mothers who had connections with the world of education themselves. They seemed to be aware that they had to 'tread a fine line' in order to maintain the optimum relationship with the school and teachers. Here the mothers' 'habitus' manifested itself in that the mothers felt that they perhaps could not have a closer relationship with the school in case it was viewed as intrusive. An inherent aspect of their 'habitus' was being perceived as 'good mothers'. In terms of 'cultural capital' and 'social capital' the mothers were seen as being similar in terms of status to the teachers but felt that it was politic to maintain some distance. This view was accepted, albeit reluctantly, by some mothers.

A small number of mothers had minimal contact with the school and could be described as 'independent' (Vincent 1996). These mothers either arranged to assist their child

themselves or organised extra-curricular or private lessons – with no reference to the school or class teacher.

In contrast to High Wood School, in the suburban schools, the greater proportion of the ‘distancing’ was instigated by the mothers. Here they felt that the teachers were the professionals and qualified to undertake the process of educating children. They themselves did not feel suitably qualified to undertake this role – therefore they were satisfied to play a minor supporting role. To some extent they could be described as being ‘detached’ (Vincent 1996) – there was a separating of the roles of home and school. The mothers who had the least contact with the school were those who possessed fewest, or no, academic qualifications themselves. In these cases home and school were very definitely two distinct and separate areas. Here the group ‘habitus’ was manifested in a separation of the contexts or ‘fields’ of home and school. This manifestation was accepted by both the teachers and mothers. The emphasis was on the professional persona of the teachers who possessed the ‘cultural capital’ to carry out the process of education. This was in contrast to the mothers who felt that they did not possess the appropriate ‘cultural capital’ to be more closely involved with the formal education process of their daughters.

The idea of ‘them and us’ was evident in the three schools at the focus of this research. It was often a two-way process – some of the ‘distancing’ initiated by the school and staff and some by the parents. The main differences lay in the emphasis of the ‘distancing’ – the proportion instigated by the school and the proportion instigated by the parents. Perhaps the most significant issues lay in the underlying reasons for the apparent gulf in home/school relationships.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **The Mothers' Own Experiences and How These Have Affected Their Attitudes Towards Their Own Daughters' Education.**

#### **Introduction.**

This chapter looks at some of the issues and events that affected the girls' mothers' education and how these, in turn, may have played a role in structuring their attitudes towards their own daughters' education. This is particularly relevant in that the attitudes the mothers developed as a result of their own educational experiences were possibly the attitudes that they brought to bear on their own daughters. It is important to understand how the mothers tried to influence their daughters and what form that influence took. To comprehend this more fully it is necessary to consider what circumstances, events and issues the mothers felt affected their own education – what they actually felt determined the outcomes of their own schooling and the forms which their education took. These factors which the mothers perceived as playing an integral part in their own educational life histories may ultimately have led them to prioritise or emphasise different aspects of education and schooling in general. The different stresses and priorities they placed on facets of their daughters' education may well have had their origins in their own educational experiences.

An interesting and very significant point that needs to be made concerning the mothers is that when they were talking about their own schooling they virtually, without exception, limited their comments to issues connected with the secondary phase of their education. They all indicated that they had enjoyed their time at primary school but, to them, the significant events in their educational lives took place at their secondary schools. These seem to have been the concerns that have left a lasting impression on them and affected their outlooks involving education and schooling particularly in terms of their own

daughters. The majority of concerns that they had for their daughters revolved around their futures and the nature of their secondary schooling. Their time at primary school was viewed as a preparation for the 'real business' of education which was to take place during their time at secondary school ie. preparation for adult life and the gaining of educational and professional qualifications.

The mothers themselves fell into three distinct categories – those who ended their schooling without gaining any formal educational qualifications, those who gained O-levels or the equivalent and the final group who gained A-levels or the equivalent and then pursued a degree course or a professional qualification. The mothers of Rachel, Judy, Val, Mandy and Suzie gained no academic qualifications. O-levels were gained by the mothers of Sally, Vicky, Louisa, Toni and Tracy. The mothers of Anna, Ellie, Linda, Jane, Kathy and Lorna pursued some form of higher education or achieved a professional qualification. Further details of the mothers' education and qualifications are included in Chapter Four and the Appendix.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section considers aspects of life outside school which affected the mothers' attitudes and education and the second section looks at school issues which affected the mothers' attitudes and education. The final section explores some of the issues that the mothers view to be significant: the significance of the type of secondary school attended, the significance of academic qualifications and the significance of happiness and fulfilment.

#### **Aspects of life outside school which affected the mothers' attitudes and education.**

This section explores three main themes: a)Parental support. b)Appropriate education for girls? c)Grammar school v Secondary modern school?

##### **a)Parental support.**

Irrespective of social background the mothers received varying degrees of support and encouragement from their own parents. However, on the whole, their parents left the

school to get on with the business of education and did not become too involved themselves. This was illustrated in the following comments:

“They just let me get on with it.”

(Mandy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

“My parents admit now they let education happen. They seemed to sort of say to me which school do you want to go to?”

(Kathy’s mother – High Wood School)

“My Dad was like live and let live – just get on with it sort of thing. I regret that maybe I wasn’t pushed more. I think to myself you know – why couldn’t he (father) have been stricter.”

(Louisa’s mother – Whitemoor School)

This separation of home and school life has varied according to the political and social mores at any given time. When these mothers were at school (during the 1970’s and the 1980’s) it was likely that these two aspects of their lives were more separate than they would be today. David(1993) looks in detail at how these boundaries have been defined between the more informal life at home and the more formal atmosphere at school. She indicates that historically there is a gulf between many of the attitudes and values of the home and school situations. This divide is more marked in working-class families. Ribbens(2000) also supports this view and emphasises how the home is a different setting to school and different practices and behaviours take place there – there being a strong boundary definition in many working-class families. She describes this as ‘the family/home as castle’ social arrangement. Vincent(1996) categorises the types of relationship parents may have with their children’s school and states that working-class parents frequently may be described as ‘detached’ – they have very little contact with their child’s school and feel that it is the responsibility of the teachers to educate the children within school. They do not see how they can really influence their child’s

academic progress. This however does not mean that they do not wish for their children to succeed in their school careers.

Ribbens(1993) further reinforces that there is less home/school continuity in working-class families by emphasising that the school is a more public context in which working-class parents feel under pressure and find it more difficult to cope. She suggests that the perceived inequality of power may well play a major role in this. This idea is also supported by Lareau(1989) who highlights the fact that parents who have lower occupational status than the teachers see them as ‘professionals’ who possess specialised knowledge and therefore they feel somewhat alienated and excluded. Further to this the lack of educational skills possessed by many of the working-class parents hampers their interaction with the teachers and may also lead them to wonder whether they are actually capable of helping their own children in terms of their educational achievements.

This was particularly highlighted by Rachel’s mother who was not only unhappy at school, but also experienced difficulties with academic work and fell behind in her school work. She said:

“I hated going to school. I was terrified every day. A school of two thousand girls, very strict, Methodist church school. Because I was so nervous and lacking in confidence it just got worse as the years went by.”

“I wish I’d gone to a school where my parents weren’t afraid of the teachers because I think that was the problem. They didn’t know how to cope with it. I don’t think they (her parents) were aware of it (the problem with school). I think they thought that as I was going to a great school they didn’t have to monitor anything.”

(Rachel’s mother – High Wood School)

The separateness of home and school life was emphasised in that her parents were seemingly unaware of her plight and she did not feel it was appropriate to discuss these issues with them. She also indicated that her parents were somewhat in awe of the school and staff and did not feel comfortable approaching the teachers. They were obviously

seen by them as figures in authority and did not wish to be seen questioning this – it was not their business to do this.

In contrast to their own parents these mothers had, or expressed a desire to have, closer contact with their daughters' schools and greater involvement with their daughters' actual education. This ranged from fairly minimal involvement such as hearing their child read at home to a much greater involvement within the school itself and the actual education process. The following comments illustrate this:

"I sit with her and hear her read. I can't do the maths though."

"I can't get up there to the school. It's too far for me to walk because of being disabled."

"I would like to know what's going on."

(Mandy's mother – Whitemoor School)

"When there's things on I go. I go to assemblies. I go to parents' evenings. I go to the school fete – anything like that – the discos they've had. Her Dad was a parent- governor. I've always done things with her."

(Louisa's mother – Whitemoor School)

"I want to go in to the school. I want to because I cherish these days the children are going to school. I want to know what the children are learning. I do a lot of homework with them at home. I want to be involved in my children's education. I want to see what they're learning and how they are being taught."

(Rachel's mother – High Wood School)

These mothers obviously felt that they should have some input concerning their daughters' education and schooling. In some cases it was severely limited but at least the education process was not totally ignored.

The issue of parents offering support in terms of finance was also raised. Lorna's mother said of her parents and their views:

"My parents paid a fortune for it (her education). I think when I changed school it was



different. My parents didn't pay school fees. There wasn't the pressure on me to work."

(Lorna's mother – High Wood School)

Here it appears that both Lorna's mother and her own parents viewed education almost as a business transaction with obligations on both sides. As long as her parents provided the money for her education Lorna's mother felt obliged to work. When they were no longer financing her at school she felt that the pressure to achieve had been removed. Interestingly her own views on financing her own children's education appeared to be rather ambivalent. She made the following comments:

"There are big holes – I don't know where to begin to tackle it. I'm getting her extra tuition in the new year."

"If we could afford it we'd pay for them to go to school but we don't want to disrupt our life style. We want to go on holidays and live in a big house."

(Lorna's mother – High Wood School)

It would appear that Lorna's mother was prepared to pay for some extra help for her daughter but beyond that the main concern was that the family's life style was not affected.

In a very different context to the one Lorna's mother experienced both Judy's mother and Val's mother indicated the problems faced by their families in terms of financial considerations and these were instrumental in the curtailment of their schooling. Judy's mother said:

"When Mum was bringing us three up (herself and two older siblings) money was tight so they didn't encourage us. If we left early we got to pay Mum."

(Judy's mother – Whitemoor School)

Val's mother said:

"The way I looked at it was – I lost my mother when I was twelve so I wanted to get working and bring money into the house to give it my Dad. That was the reason for

leaving. I left school with a job. I had a week off and then I started work.”

(Val’s mother – Whitemoor School)

Both Judy’s mother and Val’s mother highlighted the significance of bringing money into the home – this was considered more important than remaining in full time education. In both of these cases it was intimated that their families were perhaps struggling financially and extra income coming into the house would be welcome. This resulted in both of them taking on quite poorly paid, unskilled jobs – neither having a specific career structure. Schooling was not seen as a step towards gaining a fulfilling career, it was seen as a process one had to go through before entering adulthood. In terms of Val and Judy’s mothers’ families the sooner they left school and started earning the better. They were not expected to pursue a career or gain any professional qualifications – just to start earning and help to support the family.

The lack of importance of academic studies to working-class girls is highlighted by Sharpe(1994). She indicates that they often see academic studies as abstract and not relevant to them and certainly in the past they saw education as being of little value to the limited opportunities that were open to them. Working-class girls expected to be wives and mothers at an early age and predominantly worked in offices, shops or factories. This would appear to be the case for these two women – the mothers of Val and Judy. Sharpe(1994) further emphasises that their ambitions are linked to the immediate future and are not seen in the long term. The aim is to be an earner and work is not seen as a career but ‘filling in’ before possible marriage and having a family.

Where Vicky’s mother was concerned finance, family tensions and the break up of her family had a particularly devastating effect on every aspect of her life. It certainly affected her education. She said:

“I was abused by my father and grandfather. My mother at the time said she didn’t know. I was taken into care at eleven. My father was prosecuted but then the sentences were so stupid. He got two years probation. I got locked up in a children’s home for six years. I

left secondary school with five C.S.E.'s and three O-levels. I did start sixth form college but I was in a children's home and the children's home closed down. I'd got nowhere to go and so I ended up getting a flat. No money, no family so I had to leave sixth form college and get a job. I did some sort of training scheme. It was just impossible to live on the money. I worked in chip shops – any job to pay the rent. In the end I gave up and just did nothing. I moved in with Vicky's Dad, got pregnant with Vicky."

(Vicky's mother – Whitemoor School)

In terms of her education family support was non-existent and generally her schooling was not the dominant issue in her life. Her aim appears to have been to survive. The back-up Vicky's mother received when she was 'in care' was not sufficient for her to achieve her potential in terms of academic success. She herself wished to pursue her studies but lack of support – particularly in terms of finance – made it impossible to achieve her aims. The system appears to have been inadequate where Vicky's mother was concerned – it did not offer appropriate support and encouragement in place of her own family. Consequently she sought what she thought of as an alternative means of support and security – a husband and her own family.

In terms of lack of family backing and support Vicky's mother's experiences were at the extreme end of the spectrum. The other mothers in the group did not have to contend with such dire circumstances.

The mothers of Val, Judy and Vicky gave the impression that circumstances rather than they themselves decided the path that their education would take. They also indicated that as a result of this they were unable to pursue a more worthwhile career or one that they had actually chosen. They did not want that to happen to their own daughters. This was illustrated in the comments made by Judy's mother and Vicky's mother:

"I want them to do what they want to do – pursue their own careers – whatever they choose to do. I want both of mine to go on to college."

(Judy's mother – Whitemoor School)

“Vicky’s my daughter but she’s an individual. I’ve never took the decision away from her – I’ve advised her. I’ve never said you will do this, you will not do that. I’d advise if you can’t make up your mind go on to college. As long as she’s happy and hasn’t wasted whatever talent she’s got.”

(Vicky’s mother – Whitemoor School)

Here the mothers emphasised that their daughters should be able to pursue something worthwhile but something that was of their own choosing. Circumstances alone were not to force them into a path that they did not really wish to take.

Perhaps the mother who experienced the opposite of Vicky’s mother in terms of family support was Sally’s mother. She acknowledged her very supportive middle-class background but found that this had actually put some pressure on her. She commented:

“I was an only child very cosseted and protected and when I was thrust into this huge environment I was absolutely terrified. It took me a long time to settle down. I was quite unhappy and miserable to begin with.”

“I had every encouragement at home. My mother had two sisters who were school teachers and they would work with me at home.”

“I remember sobbing when I went into the lower stream (at secondary school) because I really thought I’d be set in the middle. I didn’t tell my parents when I got home. They were always supportive.”

“I was under pressure to go into teaching which I didn’t want to do. I feel it’s not really me.”

(Sally’s mother – High Wood School)

She was obviously worried about disappointing her parents as evidenced by her reluctance to tell them that she had been placed in the lower stream at secondary school. She also indicated that she felt that her family were trying to steer her towards a career in teaching. This may well have prevented her from discussing a wider range of careers with them. In the early years of her life she was obviously very sheltered and protected from

the 'world at large'. This did not really prepare her for the 'everyday knocks' of life at school. In some ways Sally's mother gave the impression that she felt that she was over-protected and this affected her in terms of coping with the socialisation process at school.

Walkerdine and Lucey(1989) consider the part mothers play in the socialisation of their daughters and how this in turn affects the way they approach their schooling. They highlight how middle-class mothers, either consciously or subconsciously, strive to be 'sensitive' mothers with a tendency to hide authoritarianism and avoid any conflicts – in contrast to the working-class mothers where their power tends to be more explicit. The middle-class mothers tend to push for more intellectual independence but almost encourage physical dependency. They encourage their children to articulate ideas and provide mental stimulation for them but in tasks such as dressing they are more likely to assist than a working-class mother. Further to this they are more likely to play with their child and be physically available to them. Where working-class families are concerned the reverse is true – the children are urged to be more independent and get on by themselves. This frequently results in middle-class girls being more likely to display dependence and an inability to cope in certain circumstances. From Sally's mother's comments it would appear that the initial problems she experienced at school may well have emanated from her almost 'over-protective', 'ultra-supportive' background which made it difficult for her to cope independently when she was away from the immediate protection of her home and parents.

Sally's mother was very aware that perhaps her own children lived a somewhat sheltered existence compared to others. She particularly equated herself with Sally and did not want her to experience the problems that she had had when she first started school. She commented about this:

"I can relate to Sally because I was very much the same. She's very quiet and takes things seriously. She didn't settle at playgroup and I had nightmares. I made her go and had her clinging to me. I was thinking this is the right thing to do – how am I going to get

her to school if she doesn't do this? And when she came home she came like a little lamb. I've not had a minute's problem since."

(Sally's mother – High Wood School)

Even though it was difficult Sally's mother saw the need for Sally to mix with other children and felt that attending a playgroup would pave the way for her starting at primary school. She used her own experiences to ease the potential problems her own daughter may experience.

#### **b)Appropriate education for girls?**

Some of the mothers felt that their education was affected because they were girls rather than boys. Their parents had very different attitudes towards the type of schooling their daughters received compared to what their brothers experienced. Tracy's mother who came from a working-class background commented:

"I passed my eleven plus and was offered a place in two grammar schools and my parents said they were too far so I didn't go. Now looking back I was more intelligent than both of my brothers. Yet my older brother went to grammar school, art school then he went to college, then he did an apprenticeship. My other brother was encouraged in music so he had all different music lessons."

"I was good sec. I wasn't any trouble. I just pottered along. I went to school. I enjoyed school. I had friends. They (her parents) left me to it."

"Now I look back and think I didn't have a single choice. No-one ever said to me – this is my parents I'm thinking of – stay on. You've done quite well, stay on and do some A-levels, go to college. Nobody ever thought that. They thought, and at the school, you definitely want to do office. You definitely need typing and shorthand, commerce, speedwriting – that sort of thing – so do those."

(Tracy's mother – Whitemoor School)

Tracy's mother obviously felt a distinct lack of backing and family support concerning her school career. She felt that this was a direct factor in her not pursuing her education

further. In her eyes her school achievements were undervalued and her career prospects limited by her parents' perceptions of what they saw as an appropriate career for her ie. office work. This was not the case for her two brothers – she felt that they were treated differently in terms of their schooling. Despite Tracy's mother gaining a place at a grammar school her parents did not let her attend the school – in contrast to her older brother who was allowed to go to grammar school. She felt that as she was not a problem at home she was very much allowed to just get on with her school life without any intervention from her parents. Whilst this was not active discouragement it was certainly a passive form of discouragement – it perhaps conveyed the impression to Tracy's mother that her academic efforts were not particularly significant or important in the eyes of her parents.

Tracy's mother's parents saw the purpose of education as being different for boys and girls. This was a view many working-class families possessed and is discussed in some detail by Kelly et al (1982). They highlight how good prospects and security are of some importance where boys' employment is concerned – implying that they will be 'providers' and that girls' work is less serious. This also points to the fact that girls and boys will have different roles within the family when they are adults. Sharpe(1994) signifies that in working-class families academic achievement is seen as more relevant and appropriate for boys and men with women expecting to be wives and mothers at an earlier age than their middle-class counterparts. Wallace(1987) also supports this opinion and feels that working-class girls are schooled to accept this position in society whereas middle-class girls are more likely to be educated to have careers.

Tracy's mother felt that as she was a girl she was not afforded the same opportunities as her brothers. This had very much affected her outlook in terms of the education of her own children – particularly where Tracy was concerned. She said about this:

"From the very beginning I wanted to make sure she got the same opportunities as Dan (Tracy's brother). I thought right I'm not going to make her into a little girl."

“From very young I’ve told the children education goes from nursery, to Infants School, to Junior School, to Senior School through to College or University. I’ve always led them to believe it goes on. There is no option to finish at sixteen.”

“I feel I was cheated. I know I could have done better.”

(Tracy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

Her emphasis was firmly placed on both of her children having the same opportunities and the chance ‘to go as far as possible’ in terms of their own education. She did not want them to feel that they had not had the chance – she herself felt that she had ‘missed out’ mainly because she was a girl.

In contrast to Tracy’s mother, the mothers of Lorna and Ellie came from relatively well-to-do middle-class backgrounds but they too were not expected to have careers. They commented:

“My father wanted me to do cookery things. I was just going to do that. It came as a bit of a shock at fourteen that I was going to have to work at all. I’d never known any women that worked.”

“I’d have preferred some pressure from home. I don’t think very much was expected of us.”

(Lorna’s mother – High Wood School)

“My father was an art teacher and an artist. He only really had any time for my one sister who was an artist. He thought women were only to cook and clean and take to bed. They wouldn’t do anything else. It (education) wasn’t really important because we were women.”

“I could have gone to a school where my mother paid which was what she wanted but he wouldn’t allow it.”

“My mother thought they’re pretty, they’re girls, they’re going to get married.”

(Ellie’s mother – High Wood School)



Where both of these women were concerned their fathers played a dominant role in the family and virtually determined the nature of their education. Despite coming from relatively well-to-do backgrounds they were not expected to have careers – the aim appeared to be to get married and be kept by a wealthy man. This was particularly the case for Lorna's mother who came from a very affluent background. She was expected to pursue activities that would prepare her for marriage and running a home. In Ellie's mother's case, because she was a girl, her father was not prepared to finance her education – he viewed it as a waste of money. Because of the nature of her family background Lorna's mother was ill prepared for life in the real world. Her views of a woman's role were somewhat unbalanced – as evidenced by her saying that at the age of fourteen she did not really know any women who worked – hardly the best preparation for choosing an appropriate occupation for a working life!

The patriarchal arrangement that existed in both the families of Lorna's mother and Ellie's mother was, according to Griffin(1985), more prevalent in working-class families where the father is designated as the 'breadwinner' – the woman's role being to look after the home and the children. The subserviency of the woman was further emphasised in that frequently the husband did not like his wife to work outside the family home. In other words the woman was totally dependent on the man for financial support. The expected future for working-class girls was possibly early marriage and having a family – therefore there was no perceived need for them to pursue academic advancement and a career. Despite Lorna's mother and Ellie's mother not coming from working-class backgrounds this was the view that predominated in their families. Beechey(1986) indicates that since the Second World War the idea of marriage being the dominant factor in whether or not a woman engages in the labour market has gradually dwindled. This view is further reinforced by Sharpe (1994) who points out that since the 1950's some women are now working and also having a family. Indeed the most likely scenario for middle-class women is for them to have a career and then possibly combine it with having a family.

Interestingly Lorna's mother indicated that her husband did not possess this view and still had a rather patriarchal view in terms of women and their position in the family. He expressed similar views to those of her own father concerning the education of girls. She said about him:

"My husband he would educate the boys and not the girls."

(Lorna's mother – High Wood School)

This would indicate that, to some extent, Lorna's mother was in a similar situation to the one that existed when she was a child in her own family.

Ellie's mother, in a similar way to Tracy's mother, felt that her education was affected because she was a girl. She did not want this to happen to her own daughter. She said about this:

"My life would have been completely different. I would have done a lot better in a different environment. The pity of it is I passed my eleven plus and went to a dire comprehensive where there was shoplifting going on. I want Ellie to be in a nice environment. It's important that they both (Ellie and her younger brother) have the same opportunities. We can't do for one and not the other. I'll probably work full-time and it will just about pay for these two to go to school. I'd even move house so they can go to ....High School."

(Ellie's mother – High Wood School)

After her own experiences she felt very strongly that her children, irrespective of gender, should be in the right educational environment for them and was even prepared to move house so that they could attend a school that she felt would be more suitable for them.

### **c) Grammar school v Secondary Modern school.**

The mothers of Anna and Jane highlighted tensions that arose in their families due to the fact that they had 'passed' the eleven plus examination and gone to grammar schools. Both of these mothers went on to experience higher education and became teachers.

Anna's mother said:

"I had a sister who went to the local secondary modern and very much resented me. I passed the eleven plus and she didn't."

"At the time she wouldn't let you do your homework. She went out whereas I was expected to sit down and do my homework."

(Anna's mother – High Wood School)

Jane's mother said:

"My parents don't really understand the value of education. My Dad really wanted me to leave school at sixteen. He didn't want me to go to university."

"My parents wouldn't have anything to do with the school. They thought it was snobbish. They wouldn't go to parents' evenings. They wouldn't buy me a uniform. I only went to university because I got a full grant. They wouldn't have contributed."

"I think they felt uncomfortable with the situation because they felt it was an upper crust school. I suppose it was creaming off the kids in the area. My Dad being a factory worker and my Mum not working they felt that they didn't fit in."

"There is a fly in the ointment. My sister passed the eleven plus and went to the school I went to and couldn't cope and ended up at the secondary modern after the first year. It caused major problems. My brother didn't pass either. My parents felt much more at home with the secondary modern situation so they used to go to parents' evenings and things for my brother and sister."

(Jane's mother – High Wood School)

Where Anna's mother was concerned the tensions arose between her and her sister. Her parents were supportive of her but her sister showed resentment of the fact that she was experiencing a different style of education – one she possibly viewed as being inferior. These differences in education led the two sisters to experience certain aspects of their life outside school differently. Anna's mother had to spend a notable amount of time studying whereas her sister was able to have more free time to enjoy a social life. The gulf between the two girls arose from their different performances in the eleven plus

examination. This selection process whereby children were divided into those who were to undergo a more academically biased education and those who were to experience a more practically founded vocational education led some children to view themselves as failures. The two types of education were supposed to be viewed as 'equal but different'. This however was not the case – the children going to grammar school were viewed as 'passing' and successful – ultimately their education would open up access to careers and higher education. Conversely the children attending secondary modern schools seemed to have more limited options and were not expected to undergo higher education and enter professions. They were destined not to be such high achievers as their grammar school counterparts.

Burwood(1992) points out that the idea of an equal but different education enshrined in the 1944 Act was never really realised. The two types of school – grammar and secondary modern – were not held in the same esteem and certainly did not provide equality of opportunity. Griffin(1985) and Sharpe(1994) indicate that girls themselves acknowledged that the education the grammar school girls were receiving was more academic and that they were expected to pursue either higher education or training ultimately leading to a qualified profession. In contrast the secondary modern school girls expected to leave school and enter the job market.

Where Jane's mother was concerned the rifts in her family were even greater – not only were there difficulties involving other siblings not attending the grammar school but her parents did not feel at ease with the nature of the school she attended. Her parents felt socially inadequate with the whole situation and indicated that they thought that the attitudes engendered by the grammar school were not appropriate for people from their social background – describing the school as 'snobbish'. They did not see the value it offered to the individual. The net result was that Jane's mother was almost alienated within her own family. Arnot(1986) indicates how working-class girls attending grammar schools may experience difficulties because the culture and requirements of the school

may conflict with the individual girl's own background. It is possible that life in the school bears little relation to her everyday life. In some instances this can become an obstacle to educational achievement.

Further to this Lareau(1989) and Reay(1998) point out that many working-class parents do not feel at ease when visiting their child's school and often have difficulty in communicating with the teachers. They are very aware of the difference in the respective levels of their education. This very much affects their attitudes in any dealings that they have with the school or members of staff.

Whilst the mothers of both Anna and Jane had difficult experiences at their secondary schools due to them undergoing a different form of education to their siblings they both possessed extremely positive views concerning the education of their own children. This was particularly noticeable in the case of Jane's mother who said:

"I've realised the importance of education. My parents didn't. It has coloured the way I think with Jane. I would like her to do well academically but not at the expense of her happiness."

(Jane's mother – High Wood School)

She firmly placed great value on education but also wanted the experience to be a happy one for her daughter.

### **School Issues Which Affected the Mothers' Attitudes and Education.**

This section explores two main themes: a) Negative attitudes towards girls. b)Career prospects and advice.

#### **a)Negative attitudes towards girls.**

A recurring issue was the idea of girls being ignored and marginalized in the classroom.

This was highlighted in the following comments:

"I think they had very low expectations for girls from the school. Unless you shone without any help whatsoever you were just left."

“What I think they lacked was looking at each individual child. If I’d gone up to my headmistress she wouldn’t have known who I was.”

(Tracy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

“Because I was shy I was very overlooked. I was there but I wasn’t there.”

(Sally’s mother – High Wood School)

“When I was at school – if you can’t do it then back of the class. I think they gave up on me. I don’t think I was clever enough for exams.”

(Mandy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

“They didn’t seem to care as much when we were at school. They used to put on the report ‘could try harder’ but they never seemed to encourage you to try harder. I think if you were classed as a ‘no-hoper’ back then they didn’t encourage you. They were just glad to get rid of you.”

(Judy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

“I was very shy. I was so quiet they said to my parents they only knew I was in the class because of the register. I guess I got overlooked. As the years went by I got further and further behind with my work until I came to my exams.”

(Rachel’s mother – High Wood School)

All of these mothers except for Sally’s mother came from working-class backgrounds. Further to this only Sally’s mother and Tracy’s mother gained some qualifications in the form of O-levels. The remaining mothers gained no academic qualifications at all. Generally this group of mothers felt that their schools did not really support or encourage them in terms of their academic progress. They gave the impression that as long as they were not causing any bother they were just left alone and got on with their daily life at school. They were not actively ‘pushed’ to succeed or progress academically – they gave the impression that only the pupils who showed that they had some academic ability received attention and encouragement. In the case of Rachel’s mother she felt that

because of her quietness and shyness she was virtually ignored – with rather drastic consequences in terms of her scholastic attainment.

At the particular time these women were at school – mainly the 1970's and early 1980's – Griffin(1985) points out that it was a common occurrence for less academic working-class girls to feel that their schools had rejected them. As Sharpe(1994) indicates teaching and schools are dominated by middle-class values and therefore working-class children are possibly disadvantaged. The different values espoused within the schools may contribute to working-class pupils feeling that school has not a great deal to offer them and exacerbates their desire not to extend their schooldays.

Measor and Sikes(1992) highlight that in the day to day life of the classroom if the girls are not interested and do not disrupt the lessons the teachers tend to ignore them as individuals. In many ways the teachers may unwittingly discourage them from taking part. This 'marginalisation' of girls is particularly explored by Stanworth(1987). She indicates that frequently teachers are often unable to name quiet girls and this has implications for their involvement in lessons. This certainly gives the wrong message to the girls ie. they are not worth bothering with.

The mothers discussed in this section felt that they had lacked active encouragement from their own schools and felt that because of this they had not achieved their full academic potential. They gave the impression that in some ways they had been cheated and felt unfulfilled in terms of their own education. This was certainly something they did not want their own children to feel and often had high hopes and expectations for them as illustrated in the following comments:

"I want her at the end of her A-levels to be able to think which university shall I go to. I don't want her to think where can I get a job from – which shop can I get into. I don't want her to think that. I want her to think what shall I do at university."

"I'm also very proud of my children – their expectations of life because they both believe

that the world is their oyster.”

(Tracy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

“I want both of mine to go on to college. I want them to pursue their own careers – whatever they choose to do. I’d like them to stay on. I don’t want them wasting their life.”

(Judy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

“I’d love her to go to college or university as it was something I never had the chance to do and I’ve always regretted it.”

(Rachel’s mother – High Wood School)

The overall emphasis was on staying on at school and hopefully going on to college or university to gain further qualifications. These mothers wanted their daughters to get as much as they possibly could from their education – they did not want them to feel ‘short changed’ or unfulfilled at the end of it.

#### **b)Career prospects and advice.**

The careers advice many of the women received was severely limited or non-existent. In many cases they appeared to have had very restricted options.

Judy’s mother said:

“I seen a careers officer once.”

(Judy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

Tracy’s mother said:

“The girls would be secretaries. If they were not clever enough they would go into a shop, if they were not clever enough they’d go into factories. There was never anything above. No-one said to me ordinary people can be lawyers, ordinary people can be teachers. Your Mum and Dad work in an office and that’s your expectations. No-one led me to believe there was a future other than that.”

(Tracy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

Rachel’s mother commented:



“I did a secretarial course. I didn’t want to do that I wanted to be a vet. The school suggested that I go to this college and do a secretarial course and at least it was probably a good thing that I did because then at least I had something I could do.”

(Rachel’s mother – High Wood School)

“I don’t really remember having much ambition. I don’t remember getting any advice whatsoever. I think what influenced me was one day I was in a building society watching this typist and I must have been impressed by that – which seems sad now. I fell into this typing trap. I wish I’d done something more challenging.”

(Sally’s mother – High Wood School)

The advice these women received in terms of possible careers and the world of work seemed somewhat limited. They appeared to have little opportunity to discuss their ambitions and what they would have liked to do. Further to this the careers information was often misleading and inaccurate (Measor and Sikes 1992). This therefore led the girls to take up occupations and employment that were within the realm of their own limited experience and knowledge.

Some of the mothers indicated that they felt that their respective schools had very low expectations for them as girls. They were not expected to achieve great things academically and their career and job prospects were somewhat limited. They were steered towards a narrow range of work situations – those traditionally the domain of women. No attempts seem to have been made to broaden their horizons and point them towards fulfilling careers.

At the time these women were at school the emphasis for the girls perceived as not being academic high flyers would be placed on their likely future domestic role as wives and mothers and on gaining what was considered to be respectable employment. Griffin(1985) and Sharpe(1994) discuss some of the limited options that were available to girls leaving school and the attitudes they possessed concerning their future participation in the world of work. Sharpe(1994) highlights how office work is viewed more positively

and is given a higher status than factory work. This is endorsed by Griffin(1985) who indicates that factory work is often seen in a slightly unsavoury light and is associated with low ability.

Sally's mother, who attended a secondary modern school, was faced with particularly limited options – the pupils attending the grammar school followed a much more academic curriculum whereas the secondary modern pupils pursued less academic, more practical courses. This meant that the majority of the girls attending secondary modern schools learnt office skills such as typing. Sharpe(1994) points out that the nature of the curriculum they were faced with inevitably led many girls to seek employment in offices.

Sally's mother voiced the views of many of the mothers discussed in this section when she said:

"I've told them (her daughters) all not to become secretaries. Once you seem to be a secretary you get into a firm and they know you can do your typing and shorthand – that's all you're going to do. It's a trap."

(Sally's mother – High Wood School)

Generally the other mothers agreed with this view and wanted their daughters to have much greater and varied career options to the ones they had been faced with when they were at school.

Interestingly some of the mothers who experienced higher education also commented on the lack of careers advice and guidance they received when they were at school. Lorna's mother said:

"The careers advice we received was dreadful. It was what do you want to do? Choose your O-levels."

(Lorna's mother – High Wood School)

Kathy's mother commented:

"It was assumed for us that going to university was the goal but along the way preparations seemed more social. I suppose it was a very protected environment. It was so

pleasant really and it was so enjoyable. University was encouraged all the way. That was the problem really – it was assumed that you would go to university. So I went to university but only for a year because at that point I suddenly realised that I didn't know where I was going. I left after a year and went to the local college and did a two year course and trained as a bilingual secretary. I was misguided at school. I didn't discuss it with enough people."

(Kathy's mother – High Wood School)

Both of these mothers attended girls' private schools and the major problem that they faced was the lack of guidance and constructive advice in terms of careers. The two of them lacked direction in terms of their future working lives – the schools aimed to equip them with academic qualifications but these did not seem to be linked to potential careers.

Anna's mother, who attended a girls' grammar school, expressed similar views concerning the guidance she received. She said about her time at school:

"The lack of freedom – you weren't encouraged. Your self-esteem was almost knocked out of you. You just sat there and were taught at. It was never very interesting. If you didn't understand it you struggled. No-one ever said you'll do well or encouraged you."

"I got no careers advice whatsoever – teaching, nursing or in a bank. If you were very bright you'd go to university."

"I think I regret I didn't think there was a greater variety of careers."

(Anna's mother – High Wood School)

Anna's mother obviously found the ethos of her school very restricting and rather limited in its approach. She indicated that she felt that the individual was not really nurtured and encouraged – academic achievement and progress were automatically expected with the emphasis on aiming to gain a place at university. She felt that there was little personal empathy and no advice concerning future careers and work opportunities. The main focus was to attend university and if that was not achieved a very limited range of careers were

considered appropriate. Careers advice was not really seen to be part of the school's function.

The opinions stated here by Anna's mother almost mirror many of the views expressed by mothers who came from working-class backgrounds and attended non-selective schools. Griffin(1985) and Sharpe(1994) document the limited options available to working-class girls at that particular time in terms of careers and future aspirations – the schools prepare them for entering the job market and offer them a limited range of vocational training ie. mainly equip them with office skills. Anna's mother indicated that she thought that her options were equally limited but included academic qualifications as opposed to vocational training. She felt that she was steered towards a narrow range of careers. Wallace(1987) indicates that where working-class girls are concerned they, on the whole, follow a traditional pattern of social reproduction ie. they are expected to seek employment straight from school and then become wives and mothers. In a similar vein middle-class girls are more likely to gain academic qualifications that lead to a career.

Anna's mother's experiences have had an effect on how she views the prospects for her own daughter. She said:

“You want it (education) to be as much fun as possible. Obviously you'd like her to do as well as she can. I want her to be happy in whatever she does. I don't want to put her under too much stress and strain. Whatever she does I want her to get a decent living from it. I would want her to have some career structure in whatever she went into.”

(Anna's mother – High Wood School)

Obviously Anna's mother wants Anna to find the educational experience enjoyable – unlike how she viewed her own education. At the same time she wants her daughter to gain a worthwhile career that offers prospects for her.

Unlike Anna's mother, Jane's mother and Linda's mother both found their time at a girls' grammar school to be a positive experience. Almost from the outset they had a clear view of the career they wished to pursue – Jane's mother wished to teach and Linda's

mother aimed to become a nurse. This idea of the individual's view of their possible future self and the link between it and academic achievement and motivation is explored by Leondari et al (1998). It is suggested that pupils who have a specific detailed image of what they would like to attain in the future are more likely to be academically successful and more highly motivated in terms of their approach towards school work. They are more clearly focussed and have a definite goal in mind. This would appear to be the case where these two mothers were concerned.

#### **The significance of the type of secondary school attended.**

This issue was not really raised by any of the mothers who, themselves, had not gained any academic qualifications. They presumed that their daughters would attend the comprehensive school designated by the Local Education Authority. However some of the mothers who had gained an O-level standard of education and whose daughters attended Whitemoor School indicated that they would like their daughters to attend a selective school. This was in fact a possibility because there were still some grammar schools in the vicinity. The comments they made included:

"Her Dad's got a real bee in his bonnet about her going to .....School (a local grammar school). Now she's bright but I don't think she's that bright. I'm really worried about the secondary school she'll go to."

(Toni's mother – Whitemoor School)

"I don't want her to go to a mixed school. I want her to go to a girls' school. I went to a mixed school. There's great things on both sides. I think if Tracy was a quiet girl and she didn't mix very well I'd be looking at a mixed school – but she's very exuberant, she's over-confident, she likes bras, short skirts, high shoes – and she's only ten. I don't want her to go to a mixed school because she'll be distracted. I mean you've got to take that into consideration."

(Tracy's mother – Whitemoor School)

“I would like her to take the eleven plus. We would like her to try and get into grammar school. She has an older sister (step-sister) who went. She’s at university now. I said to Louisa’s father I’d hate her to fall back – not be pushed. It’s so easy once you get to secondary school you get into the flow, get in with different groups. I mean if you go to grammar school every child there is on the same mission. They all want to work. It’s the kids who like the schooling. It would be good for her to be amongst people who are on the same level as her.”

(Louisa’s mother – Whitemoor School)

These three mothers raised the issue of selecting what they saw as appropriate schools for the secondary phase of their daughters’ education. They all mentioned, though Toni’s mother with some reservations, opting for a selective school rather than the comprehensive school that the majority of children in the area would be attending. Further to this all of the schools that they indicated were girls’ schools. This was seen as a particularly significant point where Tracy’s mother was concerned – she viewed the presence of boys as a possible distraction. The idea of avoiding social distractions was also at the forefront for Louisa’s mother whose own social life had directly led to her curtailing her own education. She felt that the ‘traditional girls’ grammar school’ presented the best option for her own daughter – she perceived that the heavy emphasis on the academic side of life would prevent her daughter becoming distracted by social issues.

When these particular mothers were at school single sex schooling was associated with academic privilege and the majority of private schools and grammar schools tended to be single sex schools – a position still the same today. In the areas where these mothers lived the grammar schools catered for either boys or girls. Griffin(1985) highlights how working-class pupils tend to associate these schools with being more academic and being for children from middle-class backgrounds. Having an academic education and gaining

what may be perceived as a middle-class profession were the aspirations these mothers had for their own daughters.

Sharpe(1994) points out that the girls attending grammar schools are being educated for careers not short-term, low paid employment. The expectations for them are perceived to be high. This particularly struck a chord with Tracy's mother who had gained a place at a grammar school and then had not been allowed to attend it. She felt that the school she had attended had very low expectations for her and that she did not achieve her academic potential. In particular the mothers of Tracy and Louisa saw the grammar schools as being specifically focussed on high academic achievement and they saw this as opening the way for their own daughters to succeed and have a greater choice in what they chose to do.

A number of the mothers of the girls attending High Wood School, the rural school, raised the issue of possibly making use of the private sector for their daughters' secondary education.

Kathy's mother commented:

"In an ideal world we'd like her to go to .....School (girls' private school). She knows the possibility because of what happened with her brother – he got moved."

(Kathy's mother – High Wood School)

Ellie's mother said:

"We hoped to send her to .....School (girls' private school). This had been a long term plan. I do want her to achieve her potential. I want her to be in a nice environment. I want her to be happy."

She said of the local state secondary school:

"The results are not so good. The whole ambience of the school I wasn't particularly impressed with. There will be more opportunities at .....School (girls' private school).

(Ellie's mother – High Wood School)

Kathy's mother had enjoyed her own time at a girls' private school and therefore saw it as a positive possibility for her own daughter. In contrast, Ellie's mother had been prevented from attending a private school by her father and had attended a comprehensive school where she was unhappy and unsettled. She wanted her own daughter to have a more positive experience in terms of her secondary education and therefore would like her to have the opportunity that she felt she herself had missed.

Jane's mother and Anna's mother both indicated that, if they wished, private education could be an option but both expressed strong ethical objections to resorting to it for their daughters.

Jane's mother said:

"I wouldn't even consider private education. I think people should be able to have a good education in a state school. At a real push we could possibly afford to send them but I always think about the children who can't. Why should mine have an advantage just because I can pay for it."

(Jane's mother – High Wood School)

Anna's mother said:

"She wants to go to .....School (state school). That's fine – if she's happy to go there and all her friends are going. If she didn't do well we'd have to think about where she went. If she had problems we may move her into the private sector. Working in the state system it seems a bit naughty to take your kids out and send them somewhere else."

(Anna's mother – High Wood School)

These two mothers were both teachers within the state school system.

Linda's mother said about her daughter's prospective secondary school:

"I feel quite happy. My eldest daughter went there and did well. It's a comprehensive and there's a mixed range – but I think the approach and philosophy of the school is good. My other daughter is a bright girl but she was obviously pointed in the right



direction by her teachers. It just provides the stepping stone to the wider world.”

(Linda’s mother – High Wood School)

In the majority of cases these mothers from High Wood School indicated their knowledge and understanding of the educational opportunities that were available for their daughters. On the whole they felt that they had some choice or say in the matter as to which secondary school their daughters would attend. They had to feel that the secondary school was appropriate for their individual child and there were indications that some of them had visited schools so that they could make informed decisions. These mothers certainly did not feel overawed or uncomfortable with the prospect of visiting and assessing the appropriateness of various schools. They seemed very much at home in their dealings with the education system.

All of these mothers had quite extensive personal experience of the different aspects of the education system and forms of professional training. This actual knowledge of the education system by the middle-class families is highlighted by Lareau(1989), Vincent(1996) and Reay(1998). It inherently imbues the parents with a more detailed understanding of how the education process works. Compared to their working-class counterparts it perhaps allows the middle-class parents to more easily make informed decisions involving their own children. They feel confident enough to make the system work for them and are more readily able to get appropriate help for their children. Both Lareau(1989) and Vincent(1996) show how middle-class parents find it easier to approach individual schools and members of staff and discuss relevant issues and make requests concerning their own children. They view themselves as equals to the teachers and this affects the style of communication and the way the teaching staff deal with them. Lareau(1989) and Reay(1998) view these cultural and social advantages that the middle-class parents possess in terms of cultural capital which may be used to gain further advantages within society.

### **The significance of academic qualifications.**

The attainment of some form of qualification was very much emphasised by the majority of mothers who had either gained no academic qualifications themselves or had curtailed their own education. Val's mother said:

"I'd like one of them to be a success. I don't know which one. I think I don't like them going into factory work. I'd like Val to work with a good job – something she enjoys and gets good money for. I'm determined they stay on school because I didn't."

(Val's mother – Whitemoor School)

Mandy's mother commented:

"I'd like her to do exams because that is one thing I didn't do. I wouldn't like her to be stuck in a factory. I've done factory work. I've done shop work and I've done bar work."

"If I'd stayed on for exams I could help the kids a bit more. I wish I'd been more inclined to stay at school."

(Mandy's mother – Whitemoor School)

These two mothers had ended up doing unskilled, poorly paid work when they left school – they did not want this for their daughters. They expressed the desire that their children should gain some qualifications in order to get better, more highly paid, skilled jobs when they completed their education. Generally they viewed the passing of examinations as the means to financial security and betterment. Both Val's mother and Mandy's mother emphasised that they did not want their daughters working in factories. Education was seen as the means of gaining greater financial rewards.

Judy's mother, more than anyone, emphasised her own feelings of a lack of fulfilment in terms of her education and working experience. She said:

"It's a regret on my part because as I've said to the kids I'd love to be able to get a better job. I say look at me now in a dead end job with low pay. If I'd stayed on and got some qualifications and gone on to college I'd have had more choice."

“I’d like them to stay on – if they don’t I don’t think they can achieve anything in this day and age. It’s not like when I left. There were tons of jobs out there.”

“I don’t want them wasting their lives. I don’t want to encourage my kids to get married too early. I want them to have a life – get a career, do what they want to do, see the world if that’s what they want to do before settling down.”

(Judy’s mother – Whitemoor School)

Judy’s mother wanted her children to use their schooling as a means to gaining meaningful employment with a career structure – not poorly paid, dead end jobs. She also pointed out that if they pursued further education after they left school it would give them more choice as to what they might do – the choice she did not have. Her emphasis was also on making the most of their lives and having a range of experiences such as travelling in order to have some self-satisfaction and personal fulfilment.

To an extent the change in the nature of the job market has played a role in the views expressed by these mothers. When they left school it was still possible to relatively easily gain some form of employment – not requiring any qualifications and only needing minimal skills. This was specifically mentioned by Judy’s mother. This is now not such an easy proposition particularly with the shrinkage in the job market and less need for unskilled labour. Further to this, with the dramatic increase in the incorporation of technology in all aspects of daily life and work, in order to enter any gainful employment at least some basic skills and qualifications are needed.

As Griffin(1985) and Sharpe(1994) indicate when these working-class mothers were completing their education they were not expected to pursue careers and their working lives were likely to be curtailed when they possibly married and had children – there was not a perceived need for a career. This view has now undergone a radical change – women who become mothers are expected, or encouraged, to combine a familial role with a working role. David(1999) looks at the implications and dilemmas this presents in attempting to balance a home life with a working life.

With the introduction of the National Curriculum a greater emphasis was placed on education having links with the labour market. To the women in this particular group their own education had appeared to have little connection to their working lives. They now acknowledge themselves that circumstances are different for their own daughters – they see that they are likely to have to combine a family and work life and will need skills and qualifications – either academic or vocational. This is an issue that is highlighted by the government in its White Paper (1997) Excellence in Schools. The emphasis is placed on the relevance and links education should have with employment.

Parents now have more ready access to information concerning their child's progress and the National Curriculum further emphasises the importance of achieving certain standards. This reinforces the significance of academic achievement in the eyes of these parents – an emphasis that was not so marked when this particular group of mothers were at school themselves.

Sharpe(1994) highlights how careers advice has improved since these mothers were at school and how this advice is more organised and readily available. School attitudes have changed and indeed parents seem to be more aware of both academic courses and vocational courses that are available within the Further Education sector. These mothers certainly seemed to be more aware of some of the opportunities available for their daughters. For some of these mothers high academic attainment was viewed as the means to providing choices in terms of careers. This was illustrated in the following comments:

“I just want her to achieve the best she possibly can in whichever area she wants to go into. If she can at least achieve good exam results – anything so she can better herself and have the choice like you know what university she wants to go to. How lovely if you can have a choice of what you want to do.”

(Louisa's mother – Whitemoor School)

“I would like her to take A-levels and go to university because that was the way I was headed.”

“Well she said she wanted to be a hairdresser and I said to her you don’t want to do that – stand on your feet all day, get varicose veins for no money. I think you are capable of more. Her Dad said she ought to be a lawyer or something like that as there’ll always be criminals. If she desperately wants to be a hairdresser I’d go with it. I’d rather she did that than go and work in a factory.”

“My aim with my children is to get them an education and give them the choices. I mean it’s hard enough as it is – without an education it’s nigh on impossible.”

(Toni’s mother – Whitemoor School)

These mothers expected their daughters to have a long term career rather than viewing their working lives as a series of short term options involving unskilled, unqualified labour. They had not countenanced them leaving school before they had taken their A-levels. They were expected to continue their education through to university. Perhaps they were so determined that their daughters went as far as they could in terms of their education because they themselves had curtailed their own education and in every case expressed regret about doing this.

Suzie’s mother was the only parent who did not emphasise the importance of staying on at school or gaining further vocational or professional qualifications. She seemed to have a very ‘laissez faire’ attitude. When asked if she would like Suzie to stay on at school her response was:

“You can’t make ‘em. She (Suzie) said once she finishes that’s it. She could get a nice job. I’m not bothered really. If she ends up in a factory it’s her choice.”

(Suzie’s mother – Westfield Acre School)

Her view was that it was entirely up to Suzie as to what she chose to do. She was not going to interfere or advise. It was Suzie’s life so she had to make her own decisions. Suzie’s mother’s own experiences of the world of education and employment were severely limited. She had had her first child at the age of sixteen and had subsequently had three more children – the youngest being just a few weeks old. Her world revolved

around the day-to-day care of the children in the home. She had adopted what Wallace(1987) describes as the traditional domestic role taken up by working-class women. She had a low commitment towards education and employment and saw little link between the two. Perhaps because of this she had a very limited knowledge concerning careers and training that was available therefore she was unable to perceive anything different for her own daughter.

### **The significance of happiness and fulfilment.**

Some of the mothers who had not particularly enjoyed their own time at school emphasised that they did not want this to happen to their daughters. They wanted them to enjoy their schooling and find it a positive experience. The following comments illustrate this:

“I’d like her to come out on the last day and say I really enjoyed going to school – it was great.”

(Rachel’s mother – High Wood School)

“I’ve met the teachers there (secondary school Sally’s going to). I like the teachers there. I like the fact that it’s not a huge school. I’d like to feel that she’d got the best out of it and done the best she can. I wouldn’t force her to do anything she didn’t want to do. I’d like to feel she could get a job – I don’t know what. Something she’d be happy at.”

(Sally’s mother – High Wood School)

“I’m a bit worried that when she gets to the big school she’s going to feel very lost. I want her to do the best she can. I’ve never pushed Vicky into something because I believed it. I’ve never took the decision away from her – I’ve advised her. I’ve never said you will do this, you will not do that. At the end what matters is that she’s happy and hasn’t wasted whatever talent she’s got.”

(Vicky’s mother – Whitemoor School)

Both Sally’s mother and Vicky’s mother expressed concerns about the effect starting at secondary school might have on their daughters. They didn’t want them to be

marginalized and lost. This was something Sally's mother, in particular, suffered from. Where these mothers were concerned they wanted their daughters, above all else, to feel secure and happy. They wished to support their daughters but they did not wish to exert undue pressures on them. The feeling that they gave was that they wanted their daughters' school lives to be as stress free as possible.

The views expressed by the mothers who had experienced higher education or gained professional qualifications emphasised the ideas of personal fulfilment and that education should be an enjoyable experience. These mothers were all mothers of girls attending High Wood School. Their comments included:

"At the end of her education I'd hope that she enjoyed it and it provided a basis in life to go on learning. To be always ready for the next experience and of course a stepping stone to what she wants to do in life. I see it as an end in itself as well as something to achieve a profession."

(Linda's mother – High Wood School)

"I just want her to be a well-rounded, well-balanced person who has been given the opportunity to fulfil her potential. I'm not expecting miracles. I'm not expecting them to come out with ten O-levels then get four straight A's at A-level. I just want them to have the opportunity to do as well as possible. I'm very keen that they don't grow up to be insular. I want her to have had a good enough education to have the choice."

(Ellie's mother – High Wood School)

"We'd like her to be happy in life and be able to relate socially to people. I'd like her to have a good academic record but that isn't the main thing. If she wants to go and work in the Third World then fine. As long as she's happy in what she chooses to do."

(Jane's mother – High Wood School)

"I'd like her to be happy with herself and with good achievement but mainly contentment with what she has achieved. I would like to see her qualified and be able to be self-

sufficient. I wouldn't want to see her as a high-flying academic – but I see it as important that she does have a qualification. I hope she will be happy with what she does.”

(Kathy's mother – High Wood School)

Throughout the emphasis was on finding personal satisfaction and self-fulfilment. There was a general feeling amongst the mothers that they wanted their daughters to make the most of their education ie. achieve their potential, but this was not linked to high academic attainment. Schooling was seen as the means of equipping the girls to deal with life in general – education was seen in a broader context than just providing qualifications for work. The impression given was very much the importance of education for education's sake – not just as a means to an end.

This was in contrast to the views expressed by the working-class families. Griffin(1985) and Sharpe(1994) indicate that working-class girls and their families very much see education in terms of its relevance for gaining employment and everyday skills. Where middle-class families are concerned education does not have to be linked to a specific end but is valuable in its own right.

Although these mothers did not appear to place overt emphasis on high academic achievement there was an underlying assumption that their daughters would gain qualifications that would ultimately lead to meaningful professions and careers. There was an expectation that their offspring would not just 'go to work' at the first opportunity but would become professional people with career prospects or have qualifications that could stand them in good stead in the future.

From this perspective the idea of social reproduction of middle-class values comes to the fore. Wallace(1987) points out that the general trend is that middle-class girls are more likely to be educated for a career – a view supported by Griffin(1985) and Sharpe(1994). There is an assumption that middle-class girls will remain within the education system to gain qualifications and a profession.



## **Conclusion.**

All of the mothers, irrespective of their own social background and their own academic achievements, wished their daughters to gain something from their schooling and find it a positive experience. There was a general feeling that it was really important that the girls gained some qualifications. The reasons for this appeared to vary according to the mothers' own educational backgrounds. Mothers who had gained no academic qualifications saw it as a necessity for entering the world of work – whereas they themselves had been able to relatively easily gain unskilled employment requiring no qualifications this option was no longer so readily available due to changes in the nature of the job market. They also did not want their daughters to enter, what they saw as, low status employment in factories – education was the means of avoiding this. Within the 'field' or context of both working-class and middle-class families factory work was perceived as being the domain of the least academically able and also allocated the lowest status in terms of employment. Where these mothers were concerned education was seen as a means of obtaining the appropriate 'cultural capital' to avoid this low status employment. A manifestation of the 'habitus' of the mothers, irrespective of their social background, was the inappropriateness of factory work for their daughters.

The mothers who felt that their education had been curtailed, either through decisions they had made or due to specific circumstances outside school, forcefully expressed the desire that their daughters stayed on at school and pursued either higher education or some form of professional training. They wanted their children to go as far as they possibly could within the education system. High academic achievement was seen as a means of personal betterment and providing the opportunity to gain access to higher status careers and professions. The idea of their daughters being provided with the possibility of choice was emphasised. The 'habitus' of these mothers manifested itself in the great value they placed on education as a means of acquiring 'cultural capital' for the purpose of betterment. This was perceived in terms of gaining in both 'social capital' and

‘economic capital’ and thus perhaps gaining entrance to the ‘middle classes’. The idea came across that this group of mothers felt that they had underachieved both in terms of their academic and their social standing. They wanted their daughters to achieve their true potential.

The mothers who had gained higher academic qualifications and could generally be perceived as now being of middle-class status did not overtly place the emphasis on their daughters achieving high academic qualifications. They placed great importance on the concept of self-fulfilment and actually enjoying the education process. However, although the need for high academic achievement was not voiced, there was an underlying assumption that their daughters would gain qualifications and have the choice of entering meaningful professions and pursue worthwhile careers. The ‘habitus’ of these middle-class mothers was manifest in the high value they placed on education and the expectation there was for academic attainment. The actual education process was viewed as a significant contributor to an individual’s self-fulfilment. This was the ultimate characteristic of the ‘group habitus’ concerning education where the middle-class mothers were concerned.

Some of the working-class mothers who felt that they had not achieved their own academic potential, partly because their own schools had underestimated their abilities, saw selective education as the means for their daughters to gain success. They wanted them to gain access to a grammar school type of education. When the mothers were at school attending a grammar school was seen as a mark of academic achievement and the means of going on to higher education and successful careers. These working-class mothers associated the grammar schools with middle-class cultural and social values. They were a means to gaining both ‘cultural capital’ and ‘social capital’ by allowing individuals to enter the professions or high status careers.

Where the middle-class mothers were concerned great significance was placed on the nature of the secondary phase of education their daughters were going to experience. The

mothers' own more detailed knowledge of the education system enabled them to make use of the possible choices available to them – they were more readily able to make the system work for them. Because of their relatively more comfortable financial circumstances some of them were prepared to take advantage of the private sector for their daughters to complete their education. On the whole the middle-class mothers possessed the 'cultural', 'social' and, in some cases, the 'economic capital' to take advantage of the system and obtain the best possible outcome for their own daughters.

Generally the working-class mothers saw education as the means by which their daughters could improve their life chances and open up choices for themselves. Although this was perhaps true for the middle-class mothers they saw education more as a means of self-fulfilment – education for education's sake.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Conclusion.

The girls and their mothers who participated in this research project came from a variety of social backgrounds. These differences in background and the variations in life experiences, of both the girls and mothers, contributed to a diversity of views and opinions concerning the formal education process. Indeed the social background of the individual was a major contributory factor in fashioning the actual nature of their educational experience. The context in which the formal education process itself took place ie. the school, was also affected by the social environment in which it was situated. The social and cultural backgrounds of the families involved with an individual school were, to a great extent, instrumental in determining the style of the relationships between the school, the teachers, the families and the pupils. This in turn affected the attitudes and approaches adopted within the school – thus directly affecting the nature of the individual pupil's education.

The girls as pupils within their respective schools had certain expectations placed on them by their parents, their teachers and their peers. These expectations were influential in determining how the individual girls behaved and approached their life in school.

The girls' mothers and their social background were two of the most major influences the girls experienced. These influences permeated the girls' lives at school and certainly affected the girls' outlooks and how they perceived their schooling.

Before the girls started school they formed opinions and developed attitudes by making sense of the cultural and social world in which they lived. The most immediate social circle in which they were involved was their own family and this context or 'field' provided the first influences. The social networks within which the families were involved provided a wider social and cultural context. It was from these two sources that the individual girls acquired the cultural and social resources to cope and progress when

they started school. Bourdieu(1977, 1984) refers to these cultural resources as ‘cultural capital’ and this can be a major influence on how well pupils adapt and adjust to life in school and may also in turn influence academic achievement. The different social backgrounds of the girls resulted in them possessing different attitudes towards their education and schooling. This was also reflected in the nature of the support the girls were offered by their mothers – the support frequently reflected the ‘cultural capital’ of the different family circumstances.

Bourdieu(1990a,1990b) indicates that certain essential aspects of culture are, in his view, incorporated and internalised within the actual individual and this gives rise to a person’s tendencies to think, feel and behave in particular ways. This he defines as the ‘habitus’ – this reflects how an individual relates to the world around him/herself. This concept was particularly significant in terms of how the girls and mothers from different social backgrounds related to, and participated in, the education process. Depending on the social background the individual’s ‘habitus’ was manifested in a variety of ways. Some aspects were uniform for a particular social group thus indicating a ‘group habitus’ ie. certain behaviours and attitudes were expected of individuals within specific social groupings. An individual could be a member of a number of different cultural and social groups and so their attitudes and behaviours could vary with context –there were different manifestations of the ‘habitus’.

Irrespective of social background where the primary curriculum was involved certain perceptions and attitudes were inherent where the girls were concerned – and also their mothers. These were very much linked to how they perceived the hierarchical structure of the actual curriculum – some subjects were allocated a high status and others a low status. This inevitably affected the girls’ attitudes and approaches concerning different subject areas. Universally English and mathematics were allocated a high status as these were perceived as enabling the girls to be competent in the adult world and would also assist in them gaining credentials that they believed would help them in the future (Measor 1984,

Stables 1997, Paechter 2000). Competency in these subjects was essential to be a successful pupil – manifestations of each individual's 'habitus' were to be literate and numerate. In this respect notable influence came from the girls' mothers who emphasised the importance of the 'basics' and saw the teaching of them as the major role of the primary school. They saw these subjects as a means of acquiring literacy and numeracy and therefore the means of gaining 'cultural capital' in order to succeed in life and also to succeed within the education system.

Inadequacies in the realms of mathematics and English gave rise to concerns – both from the girls and their mothers but there was a slightly different emphasis. The girls expressed far more worries than their mothers concerning mathematics. Sometimes the style and approach used in the teaching of the subject caused discomfort and insecurities for the girls (Newstead 1998, Boaler 1994, 1997a, 1997b). The dislike of confrontational and competitive methods of teaching appeared to be incorporated into the group 'habitus'. It seemed to be assumed by both the girls and their mothers that mathematics was a 'difficult' subject – an accepted manifestation of the girls' 'habitus' was the feeling that mathematics was not easy for girls and they would be expected to struggle for success in it.

In contrast to the girls, the mothers were more concerned if their daughters were not succeeding in an aspect of English – particularly reading. It was expected as normal for girls to succeed and be proficient in this subject area. An integral part of the female 'habitus' was to associate more readily with English than mathematics – success in English being more likely to be attributed to girls than boys.

A subject that proved to be an anomaly was science. Both the girls and their mothers placed little emphasis on it whereas in terms of the schools and the education system it was allocated a high status. The girls' 'habitus' gave rise to the feeling that they were unable to relate to the subject and they almost disassociated themselves from this curriculum area. Here the mothers' influence perhaps came into play. They had rather

negative views of their own science education and mainly linked the subject with the secondary phase of education. In their eyes it did not seem to have a place in the primary curriculum and that really the main aim of primary education was to enable their daughters to become literate and numerate. Expertise in science was not part of the persona of a primary school pupil. The mothers also indicated that individuals either showed a predilection for 'arts' subjects or 'science' subjects – the more accepted route of study being 'arts' subjects for girls. Here one has the idea that science is a 'male' subject (Measor 1984, Siskin 1994, Paechter 2000). These feelings concerning certain subject areas seem to be incorporated as manifestations of the 'group habitus' of the majority of female pupils.

Subjects that appeared to be designated as peripheral by the girls included the humanities subjects of history, geography and R.E. (Stables 1993, Paechter 2000). These subjects were really seen as 'extras' to the main business of schooling which was the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills. The working-class girls saw little relevance in these subjects at all but the middle-class girls were not quite so negative and dismissive in their views of these particular subjects. These differences most probably emanated from the different social backgrounds of the girls and the influences exerted upon them by their families – specifically their mothers. The 'habitus' of the middle-class families incorporated the idea that aspects of these curriculum areas were culturally desirable – they enabled individuals to acquire significant 'cultural capital'. It was considered apposite to pursue interests connected to these subject areas, in the form of hobbies and what could be called 'cultural recreation', outside of school time. These could be seen as cultural enrichment activities. The working-class mothers frequently were not able to provide this type of 'extra' – mainly because of financial constraints.

The curriculum subjects that the girls found most enjoyable revolved around art, music, P.E. and games but these were allocated a low status in terms of the hierarchical structure of the curriculum and were viewed as 'informal' subjects (Measor 1984). They were

often pursued outside school. Here the 'field' or context of social class presented differences in attitude towards the approach adopted in participating in these activities. The middle-class girls tended to pursue these in a more organised way. These were seen as desirable cultural 'extras' – a way of gaining further 'cultural capital'. In contrast the working-class girls participated in these activities in a more ad hoc manner – the activities being unstructured and self-generated.

When the girls were experiencing difficulties with their schoolwork the manner in which they were helped to overcome their problems was frequently indicative of a different social background (Lareau 1989). The middle-class mothers often possessed the appropriate knowledge and 'cultural capital' to provide 'extra' help themselves or, in some cases, they financed private lessons. In contrast the working-class mothers felt that they frequently did not possess the appropriate knowledge or 'cultural capital' to provide adequate assistance. They expected the necessary support to come from their daughters' schools.

In terms of evaluating their own and others' abilities the girls used various criteria but the predominant factor was prowess at mathematics (Jones and Smart 1995). Both the girls and their mothers endowed this subject, along with English, with a high academic status. Achievement in these subjects was perceived as essential – thus these subjects were viewed as indicators of ability. Being accomplished in these areas was an essential manifestation of the group 'habitus' of female pupils – from the perspective of the girls themselves and also their mothers.

In terms of the girls it was part of their individual and group 'habitus' that they felt that mathematics was 'difficult'. This perhaps emanated from the actual nature of the subject which seemed to manifest itself in what could be described as a masculine manner – focusing on theoretical contexts, rationality, quantitative methods and a linear way of approaching issues. Mastery of this subject was therefore taken as exhibiting high



academic prowess because it was not seen as an area in which girls naturally excelled or with which they were normally aligned in terms of their gender.

Again within the 'fields' or contexts of both the home and school certain behaviour and personality traits were expected of the girls in their approach towards schoolwork and education in general – working hard, being quiet, generally behaving in a decorous manner, being neat, not drawing attention to themselves as individuals (Walden and Walkerdine 1985, Walkerdine 1988, Delamont 1990, Measor and Sikes 1992). These behaviours could be said to be typically feminine traits and were engendered into both the individual 'habitus' and the group 'habitus' of the girls. The behaviours were reinforced by both the girls' teachers and their mothers. Whilst adhering to these codes of behaviour the girls are deemed to be successful at their primary schools but there is a cumulative undesirable effect. Because the girls' behaviour was not bad, teacher criticisms became directed towards the academic content of work and this, in turn, could have had an undermining influence concerning self-esteem – particularly the individual girl's academic self-esteem. Ultimately this could have led some girls to underestimate their true abilities and be ultra-critical of their own work (Murphy 1991, Licht and Dweck 1987). The girls who seemed the most affected by the 'double bind' imposed by the expected behaviours and the resulting teacher approaches to their work were the middle-class girls who were very able. The 'middle-class habitus' engendered achievement and academic success. This was perhaps a contributory factor as to how they perceived their individual achievements and why they reacted as they did to criticisms of their work. They took to heart criticisms and at the same time constantly compared themselves to the most able pupil in the class. This resulted in them focusing on their mistakes rather than the work that was correct. The end result was that they exhibited some anxieties and also, more often than the other pupils, underestimated their abilities.

The relationships of the mothers with the individual primary schools were significant as they, to a notable extent, were indicative of their attitudes towards schooling and

education in general. This in turn had an effect on their approach towards their individual daughters in terms of their primary education. The nature of the educational experience and the academic and professional qualifications gained appeared to be significant factors in the nature of the home/school relationships experienced by the mothers. The middle-class mothers from the rural school who, on the whole, had gained some qualifications were advantaged in terms of 'cultural capital'. This appeared to affect the nature of the attitude of the school and teaching staff where these mothers were concerned. In terms of 'cultural capital' and 'social capital' the middle-class mothers perceived themselves as being 'equal' with the teachers and vice versa. This appeared to pose difficulties for the teachers as their perceptions of themselves as knowledgeable professionals, which was an inherent manifestation of their group 'habitus', could be open to deep scrutiny and questioning because of the social and academic standing of this group of parents. From this point of view the parents were kept at a distance by the school (Vincent 1996, Reay 1998).

On the whole the middle-class mothers were viewed as being 'supportive' (Vincent 1996) in that they were prepared to accept the school's view of their role in the education process and they attended the school initiated events and meetings. A very small proportion of mothers were able to be 'participants' (Vincent 1996) in some aspects of school life but the scope of their activities was strictly limited by the staff and the school. Being 'supportive' in terms of education and schooling was an expected manifestation of the group 'habitus' of middle-class mothers – expected by both the mothers and the teachers.

At the suburban schools, in contrast to the rural school, the idea of keeping the parents at a distance was not so marked and obvious. This may well have been due to the different social and economic circumstances of the families. On the whole the mothers could be viewed as not possessing the same 'cultural', 'social' and 'economic' capital as the teachers. The teachers therefore did not feel that their professional status was questioned

or scrutinised to the same extent as it could be by middle-class mothers. If a working-class mother did question a professional or academic matter the teacher perceived this as wholly inappropriate as the individual was seen to be lacking in the necessary 'cultural capital' to make what, in his/her eyes, was an informed judgement.

The teachers viewed the majority of the working-class mothers as being 'supportive' (Vincent 1996) – they attended school designated events and generally accepted the schools' view as to what was a suitable role for them as mothers. Very few mothers were able to play a 'participant' role (Vincent 1996) in the school because of their work and familial commitments. The small number that did participate did so on a very limited scale – performing tasks peripheral to the education process. The group 'habitus' of these mothers manifested itself in that they were supportive of their daughters in terms of their education but their support was limited in its closeness. They as individuals felt that this was appropriate and would not feel comfortable with a closer relationship. This was also the role that was perceived as appropriate by the schools and teaching staff.

One or two mothers had virtually no contact with the school and could be described as 'detached' (Vincent 1996). They did not deem it necessary as they viewed education as being the sole domain of the school and the teachers. On the whole these tended to be the mothers who possessed few, or no, academic qualifications themselves.

Where the middle-class mothers were concerned there was evidence to suggest that a notable number of them also kept their distance – albeit reluctantly. In this instance the mothers were concerned that they were seen in a positive light by the teachers and were not seen to be interfering or fussy. Here the mothers' 'habitus' manifested itself in that the mothers felt that they could not have a closer relationship with the school in case it was viewed as intrusive. An inherent aspect of their 'habitus' was being perceived as 'good mothers'.

A small number of middle-class mothers had minimal contact with the school and arranged to assist their child themselves or made alternative arrangements for support with no reference to the school or class teacher. They could be described as 'independent'(Vincent 1996).

The working-class mothers generally felt that the teachers were the professionals and qualified to undertake the education of their children. They themselves did not feel suitably qualified to undertake this role – therefore they were satisfied to play a minor supporting role. To some extent they could be described as 'detached'(Vincent 1996) – there was a separating of the roles of home and school. The mothers who had the least contact with the school were those who possessed fewest, or no, academic qualifications. Here the group 'habitus' was manifested in a separation of the contexts or 'fields' of home and school. This was accepted by both the teachers and the mothers.

Inevitably the mothers' own personal experiences of the education system had affected their outlooks and how they related to it in terms of their daughters' schooling. Whether or not they had had a good or a bad experience all of the mothers wished their daughters to gain something from their education and find it a positive experience.

The mothers own experiences had affected the ambitions they had for their own daughters. Generally the mothers felt that it was really important that the girls gained some qualifications. Mothers who had gained no qualifications themselves saw it as a necessity for entering the world of work and they also saw education as a means of avoiding low status employment in factories(Sharpe 1994). Where these mothers were concerned education was seen as a means of betterment and obtaining the appropriate 'cultural capital' to avoid low status work.

Any mothers who felt that their own education had been curtailed, for whatever reason, were absolutely adamant that their daughters stayed on at school and pursued either higher education or some form of professional training. They wanted their children to go as far as they possibly could within the education system. The 'habitus' of these mothers

manifested itself in the great value they placed on education as a means of acquiring 'cultural capital' for the purpose of betterment – perhaps gaining entrance to the 'middle-classes'(Lareau 1989, Vincent 1996, Reay 1998). They wanted their daughters to achieve their true potential.

The middle-class mothers placed great importance on the concept of self-fulfilment and actually enjoying the education process. However, there was an underlying assumption that their daughters would gain qualifications and have the choice of entering meaningful professions and pursue worthwhile careers. The 'habitus' of these middle-class mothers was manifest in the high value they placed on education and the expectation there was for academic attainment. The actual education process was viewed as significant contributor to an individual's self-fulfilment.

Concerns were voiced by some mothers revolving around their daughters' potential secondary education. Some of the working-class mothers who felt that they had not achieved their academic potential wanted their daughters to attend selective grammar schools. They linked this with academic achievement. The middle-class mothers also placed great significance on the nature of the secondary education their daughters were going to receive but they were able to make use of the education system and assess all possible choices. In some instances this involved making use of the private sector(Lareau 1989, Vincent 1996, Reay 1998). On the whole the middle-class mothers possessed the 'cultural', 'social' and, in some cases, the 'economic capital' to take advantage of the system and obtain the best possible outcome for their own daughters.

The influences of the girls' mothers and the girls' social backgrounds pervade their attitudes and approaches towards their education. Both of these were major influences in terms of how they related to the education system. In turn these may well affect their educational expectations and potential achievements.

# Appendix

## Educational and Employment Backgrounds of the Mothers from the Suburban Schools

Name	Present Employment	Education	Qualifications	Previous Employment
Suzie's mother	-	State Primary and Comprehensive	None	-
Judy's mother	Shop assistant	State Primary and Comprehensive	None	Worked in supermarket Factory work
Louisa's mother	Trainee display artist in chain store	State Primary and Comprehensive F.E. College	4 O-levels C.S.E's Arts Foundation course	Photographic assistant Aerobics teacher
Mandy's mother	-	State Primary and Comprehensive	None	Shop assistant Bar work
Toni's mother	Runs a children's nursery	State Primary and Comprehensive	5 O-levels 4 C.S.E's	Worked in photographic laboratory Company representative
Tracy's mother	Works in local housing department	State Primary and Comprehensive	C.S.E's B.Tec in public administration	Clerk Secretary Library assistant
Val's mother	-	State Primary and Comprehensive	None	Shop assistant
Vicky's mother	-	State Primary and Comprehensive	3 O-levels 5 C.S.E's	Shop assistant

## Educational and Employment Backgrounds of the Mothers from the Rural School

Name	Present Employment	Education	Qualifications	Previous Employment
Anna's mother	Teacher	State Primary and Girls' Grammar School Teacher Training College	8 O-levels 3 A-levels B.Ed	-
Kathy's mother	Administers husband's veterinary practice	State Primary and Girls' Private School University – 1 yr College – 2 yrs	8 O-levels 3 A-levels Bilingual Secretarial qualification	Bilingual secretary
Lorna's mother	Trainee teacher	Private Primary and Secondary School State Comprehensive – 6 <sup>th</sup> form Cookery course at college Typing course	10 O-levels	Worked in offices
Sally's mother	Secretary for husband's company	State Primary and Secondary Modern School College – Secretarial course	4 O-levels Secretarial qualification	Trainee medical secretary
Ellie's mother	Nurse	State Primary and Comprehensive School	5 O-levels Nursing qualification	-
Jane's mother	Teacher	State Primary and Girls' Grammar School University Polytechnic	9 O-levels 3 A-levels B.A. P.G.C.E	-
Linda's mother	Nurse	State Primary and Girls' Grammar School	7 O-levels 3 A-levels Nursing qualification	-
Rachel's mother	-	State Primary and Girls' Comprehensive School in Australia Secretarial course	Secretarial qualification	Secretary



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